

Asimov's

MARCH 2010

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A woman with short blonde hair is lying down, wearing a highly reflective, red, segmented suit that resembles a futuristic or cybernetic armor. The suit has a metallic sheen and is covered in various wires and mechanical details. She is looking towards the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and indistinct, with some light reflecting off the suit's surface.

The Tower

Kristine Kathryn
Rusch

Blind Cat Dance
Alexander
Jablokov

William Preston



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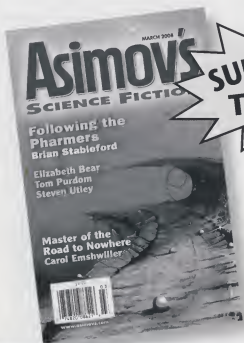
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SCIENCE FICTION

MARCH 2010

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AFFECTING ETERNITY II

Last month, I looked back at two of the people who mentored me in my early days at *Asimov's*. I found the title for the editorial in Henry Adams's observation that, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." In this editorial, I thought I'd change directions and write about some of the people who have spent time at *Asimov's* as college interns.

Anyone who interns at *Asimov's* also interns at *Analog*, our sister magazine. Due to our small staff size, interns get their hands in almost every aspect of magazine production. As a result of their experience with us, our interns may get a greater overview of magazine publishing than they would have at an internship with a much larger publisher. Interns get to do some proofreading, read through piles of unsolicited manuscripts, work on our Readers' Award poll, help us shepherd the magazine through the various stages of production, and myriad other tasks. They don't get the final word on submissions or the proofreading, but they do get to read a lot of interesting stories. Of course, they also get exposed to a lot of boring aspects of the job as well.

With any luck, the internship helps young people decide if publishing is the field for them or if it's actually the last thing they'd ever want to do. We look for people who are deeply interested in SF and/or fantasy. Ideally, they are conversant with modern authors as well as the classics. When we interview an intern, we are always careful to describe the duller aspects of the position along with the fun. Twenty years ago after an interview with Tina Lee—then *Analog's* managing editor and a former intern herself—and me, Scott Calvin told a friend, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is I got the job. The bad news is I got the job." In a recent email, Scott, who is now

a physics professor at Sarah Lawrence College, said, "It seemed like the bulk of the interview consisted of being told what a lousy job it was! Fortunately, that didn't turn out to be the case."

Some of our interns, like Tina, Paul Stevens, and Shelley Frier, were eventually hired for full-time positions at *Asimov's* and *Analog*. Many moved on to jobs at other publishing houses. Paul is now with Tor Books, Shelley worked at Avon Books for several years before moving to Baltimore, Maryland, and Tina became the director of editorial production at Berlitz Publishing. Josh Starr is an associate editor at DAW Books. Liz Scheier, who worked at Random House and Penguin, is now the director of publishing relations at ScrollMotion, the company that makes the Iceberg e-reader application for the iPhone.

Like Liz and Scott, many of other interns have moved further afield. David Sandner is now assistant professor of Romanticism and Children's Literature at California State University, Fullerton. Meredith Bennett is in law school. She's doing an "externship" for the Environmental Protection Bureau of New York's Attorney General Office, and hopes to go into environmental law once she graduates. Brittany Trogen works in a molecular biology lab during the day. After hours, she moonlights as a director of a "new (and very small) science communication company called Science in Seconds, Ltd. Our main goal is to increase science literacy in the general public." Brittany has also sold stories to a couple of Canadian speculative fiction magazines.

I've lost touch with many of our interns, but every so often one will resurface to update me on his or her career trajectory. Jacob Weisman—the publisher of Tachyon Publications—is the intern I hear from most regularly. Tachyon is a highly re-

garded small press. It has published award-winning writers like Peter S. Beagle, Michael Moorcock, Nancy Kress, Tim Powers, Cory Doctorow, and Harlan Ellison. Recently, Jacob recounted how his time at our magazine affected him:

Interning at *Asimov's* changed my life. Yes, Sheila. All those papers you gave me to file, all those envelopes I had to open, all those story notes I wrote up for the art department, all of it. I know you don't really believe it, but it did. I met Isaac Asimov exactly once; I enjoyed a memorable lunch with you, Jack Dann, and Lucius Shepard in which some very minor hijinx ensued; and Jim Frenkel [a book editor who dropped by] made fun of the way I dressed. But mostly there was work to be done and I learned that that came first. I was exposed to the work of many fine writers, including Jack McDevitt, Michael Swanwick, and James Patrick Kelly (all of whom I went on to publish years later at Tachyon).

I'd planned at the time to become either a journalist or a freelance fiction writer. While my time at *Asimov's* didn't discourage me from these pursuits, it did show me some of the other avenues open to me, that there were other important jobs to be done and that I could do them. But most of all I got to watch you put out a magazine. The *Asimov's* offices were crowded then. Isaac and Gardner Dozois came in on Tuesdays; Tina Lee and I were there every day; Stanley Schmidt and Shelley Frier ran *Analog* in the next office, barely larger than a cubicle. I saw you wait each evening for the other editors to leave. Your door would shut and the real work, the hard work, would begin.

I can only hope that we did more good than harm for Jacob. Our latest intern is Samantha Chapman, a student at New York University. It's fun to be working with her now. In a few years, perhaps she'll stop by to let us know if this internship has had any influence on the path that she chose for herself. ○

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Editorial Director (1977-1992)

Stories from *Asimov's* have won 50 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 18 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007-2352. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

SHOWING AND TELLING

One of the most frequently repeated mantras of writing instructors and the leaders of writing workshops is "Show, Don't Tell." By which is meant, "Define your narrative situations by depicting people in conflict, not by telling your reader *about* the people and their problems." Writers are urged to think of themselves as movie cameras, observing and recording the doings of their characters as they go through a series of significant events. Editorial comment by the author, standing outside the action and letting us know what to think about it as it occurs, is discouraged. "Plot is character in action," we are told: you show your people meeting their challenges in the way that is *characteristic* of them—note the repetition of terms—and thus a story will unfold. Beginners are warned of the perils of "expository lumps," great unbroken masses of author-provided data, which these days are more frequently called "infodumps."

There is wisdom in such teachings. By and large I have lived by them myself over the course of a career that now stretches more than fifty-five years. I think of a story as a series of vividly visualized scenes that eventually reveal a meaning, without the need for me to provide extensive hints about what's going on. (Except when I do feel that need. I'll get to that next issue.) It's an effective storytelling technique, long proven by example. No less a writer than Henry James—whose work is nobody's idea of fast-paced action fiction—constantly abjured himself to "Dramatize, dramatize!"—don't spell it out, just show characters in opposition, as though on a stage.

Ernest Hemingway, fifty years later, was a prime advocate of letting dialog and action carry the tale. "The Short

Happy Life of Francis Macomber," one of the best short stories of the last century, begins briskly with the sentence, "It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened," and the story goes on from there without pausing for explanations. Even Hemingway can't help a little auctorial intrusion: on page two he tells us that Macomber "had just shown himself, very publicly, to be a coward," something that more usually he would have left for us to figure out for ourselves. But generally he lets his stories be told entirely through action and implication. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for example, begins without delay: "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees." Eventually we learn that the man in the forest is there to blow up a bridge, but Hemingway tells us that important fact by way of a dramatized scene. Nowhere is there any solid slug of explanation. We learn about Hemingway's protagonist and the job he must do by watching him go through his tasks and interacting with the other characters; there is a minimum of outside-the-frame commentary.

Science fiction seems to require such commentary, because so much of it deals with unfamiliar worlds far removed from ours in space or time. One can drop one's characters down in modern-day New York or London or in a pine forest in Spain and let readers shift for themselves, and sooner or later they will figure things out, but when the readers are presented with the New York of AD 3874, or with a starship arriving on Betelgeuse XVI, it does appear useful to give the reader a few hints about what's what in those strange surroundings.

Thus stories in the magazines of the pioneering publisher of science fiction magazines Hugo Gernsback often were festooned with helpful footnotes that explained the scientific background of a story or its extrapolative content. Here, for example, is Cecil B. White's "The Return of the Martians," from a 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*, in which the Martians instruct a scientist on Earth to transmit messages to them for exactly 0.0049 of a day, and a footnote tells us, "The decimal amounts to nearly seven minutes. The Martians, being unaware of our system of measuring time, were compelled to adopt this method of conveying the time interval to us. This system is used a great deal in astronomical work for, as will be seen, it facilitates computation considerably."

This is telling with a vengeance. But Gernsback was, basically, a gadgeteer whose interest in science fiction centered almost totally on its value in arousing young readers' interest in science and technology. In their earliest years his magazines reprinted a great many old stories by those great forerunners of science fiction, H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, both of whom understood how to mix scientific speculation with storytelling while keeping a tale moving steadily. But when he ran out of reprints, Gernsback turned for his material mainly to a group of science-oriented amateur writers who cared very little about plausible characters or dramatic plots, and wanted only to tell tales of interesting scientific situations. Where that required a lot of explanation, most of Gernsback's authors lacked the skill to work it into the narrative.

The big, dignified-looking Gernsback magazines went out of business in less than a decade, and their successors were pulp-paper periodicals with names like *Astounding Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* that specialized in swiftly moving action-based stories for readers who had no interest in scientific lectures. These pulp magazines all too often went too far in the other direction, eliminating not

only the lectures but the science, and serving up stories that were essentially just simple tales of cowboys and Indians on Mars, with ray-guns replacing the six-shooters and grulzaks instead of Indians. They were fun, and in the hands of a gifted storyteller like Edgar Rice Burroughs they had a kind of cockeyed splendor about them, but they held very little interest for any reader past the age of about fourteen.

It remained for Robert A. Heinlein, starting in 1939, to come up with a way of handling the speculative aspect of science fiction in a manner that would keep a story moving swiftly while at the same time holding the interest of readers more mature than those attracted by the pulps. He adopted—whether consciously or by independent invention, I have no idea—the show-don't-tell technique of Hemingway, adapting it cunningly to the special needs of science fiction, and quickly he became the most interesting and successful writer of SF since H.G. Wells, forty years before.

Heinlein's great innovation involved thrusting readers into the future as a going concern and forcing them to figure things out as they went along. Probably his most famous demonstration of the technique is found in the opening pages of his 1942 novel *Beyond This Horizon*, in which we see his protagonist riding to the thirteenth floor of a government building, where he gets aboard a "slide-way" and steps "off the strip" in front of the door of the office he is seeking. And then: "He punched the door with a code combination, and awaited face check. It came properly, the door dilated, and a voice inside said, 'Come in, Felix.'"

No one had ever written science fiction that way before. There are no footnotes and no explanations. *Mounted a slideway*. Heinlein doesn't describe it. He just tells you that that's how you move around in the future. *Awaited face check*. The door is scanning people. *The door dilated*. It didn't simply open; it *dilated*. So we know that we are in a future where iris-aperture doors are standard items. And we

are only a dozen lines or so into the world of *Beyond This Horizon*.

Heinlein seems to have hit on that method of depicting the future right at the outset of his career. His first published story, "Life-Line" (1939), establishes its conceptual framework entirely through dialogue and action. In "The Roads Must Roll" (1940), he does do a few paragraphs explaining the replacement of conventional highways with mechanized conveyor-belt strips, but only after the story is well along. In "If This Goes On—" (also 1940) he creates a strange, forbidding puritanical culture of the future purely by allowing us to inhabit it; there are no historical lectures telling us how we got from here to there. The story is as exciting now as it was seventy years ago. In the relatively late novel *Friday* (1982), we get the full Heinlein technique from the first words: "As I left the Kenya Beanstalk capsule he was right on my heels. He followed me through the door leading to Customs, Health, and Immigration. As the door contracted behind him I killed him. I have never liked riding the Beanstalk. My distaste was full-blown even before the disaster to the Quito Skyhook. . . ."

I quote Heinlein so much here, not only because he was the primary advocate of the Show, Don't Tell school of writing science fiction, but because he also provides us with permission to depart from it when necessary. It can be found in his celebrated 1947 essay, "On the Writing of

Speculative Fiction," which is prefaced, significantly, by this notable quote from Rudyard Kipling:

"There are nine-and-sixty ways

Of constructing tribal lays

And every single one of them is right!"

In his essay Heinlein concisely discusses what a story is, lists what he thinks the three main plots of all fiction to be, provides five excellent prerequisites for a story that is specifically *science fiction*, and offers five much-quoted rules for conducting a career as a writer, four of which strike me as exemplary ("2. You must finish what you start.") and one that seems to me utterly wrongheaded ("3. You must refrain from rewriting except to editorial order."). But while laying down all these laws, Heinlein also tells us this:

"Don't write to me to point out how I have violated my own rules in this story or that. I've violated all of them and I would much rather try a new story than defend an old one."

There we are. We have Rudyard Kipling's assurance that there is more than one way to construct a satisfactory story, and we have Robert A. Heinlein's admission that he would cheerfully break his own rules whenever it seemed necessary to do so. And so, having devoted this issue's column to a defense of the classic writing-school slogan, "Show, Don't Tell," I'm going to come back to the theme next time and discuss the importance of not taking that slogan too seriously. ○

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THE PRICE OF FREE (Part One)

gratis

It's time to talk about free. Actually, we've been talking about free for the ten plus years that I have been your net columnist. As you have no doubt discovered by now, vanishingly few of the sites that I commend to your attention ask you to pay money for the use of their content. Strictly in terms of dollars and cents, most of the sites we discuss here are functionally free. However, there are economic transactions of sorts going on between you and any site that you visit as a result of reading this column—only they take place in the currencies of the net. You “pay” **attention** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention_economy> by clicking over to a site. And if you like what you see on a site, you might mention it to friends, or link to it on your blog or from your website, enhancing its **reputation** <ryo.iloha.net/writing/reputation_econ.php>. And since many businesses and netizens have found ways to convert “wealth” in the attention and reputation economies into the kind of wealth that they can deposit in banks, maybe we need to come to a new understanding of free.

The spark for this month's exercise in freethinking is the publication of a controversial book, **Free: The Future of a Radical Price** <amazon.com/Free-Future-Radical-Chris-Anderson/dp/1401322905>, by Chris Anderson <the.longtail.com>. Anderson, as the editor of **Wired** <wired.com> and author of the influential **The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More** <amazon.com/Long-Tail-Future-Business-Selling/dp/1401302378>, is one

of the Pundits-General of the new century. You may recall that back in 2006, Anderson pointed out the under-exploited potential of niche markets. While bestselling books, movies, and CDs will inevitably yield big profits, products that appeal to smaller and more diverse audiences can command a significant market share. These products form the eponymous “long tail”; it was Anderson's insight that businesses that can find a way to store and sell them (think Amazon and Netflix) will prosper. Now he's back with *Free*, thinking very hard about how to make money by giving stuff away for nothing.

Anderson lists four ways this can occur.

Direct Cross Subsidies. These are offered to entice you to pay for something else. For instance, as long as you pay off your credit card bill on time, it's free, right? Wrong. Retailers must pay your credit card company, and they build that extra cost into the price you pay. Here's another: you can listen to a giveaway audiobook version of *Free* by clicking over to **Audible.com** <audible.com/adbl/site/products/ProductDetail.jsp?productID=BK_AVEN_000001&BV_UseBVCookie=Yes>. While you are nosing around the site trying to figure out how to get your free download, Audible hopes that you might be tempted to buy another audiobook.

Three Party Markets. You know this one: advertising. When you turn the radio on, it doesn't cost you anything; neither does over-the-air television. The advertisers buy space from the programmers who offer free programming so that you will buy from the advertisers. Magazines and newspapers, while not exactly free, were

able to keep the cost to their readers to a minimum thanks to ads. Want to know why newspapers are an endangered species? It's because you sold your car on **Craigslist** <craigslist.org>.

Freemiums. These are all over the web. Offer a free service or product to everyone and anyone. Get them to depend on it. Then offer a more useful version of the same service and charge for it. According to Anderson, web entrepreneurs have discovered a Five Percent Rule: if 5 percent of the users pay for the premium product they can subsidize the rest of us.

Non-monetary markets. At least that's what Anderson calls them. I think using the word market here is kind of shaky. In this catchall category Anderson lumps what I would call the sharenets with piracy. I may be naïve, but I think there are many, many more people creating sites to share their knowledge or enthusiasms, to express themselves, or just to make the net (and the world) a better place than there are people ripping other people off. Why do the altruists share what is theirs with the rest of us? In some cases, it may be to participate in the attention and reputation economies, but I can't tell you how many times I've written a site up in this column only to have the webmaster email me in astonishment and gratitude that I'd ferreted out their pet projects and thought them worthy of mention. Are we talking about economics or self-actualization here?

It occurred to me to inventory some of my own storehouse of free products, services, and sites and sort them according to Anderson's definitions. Here's a caveat: human behavior is over-motivated, and anything on the list that follows may have been designed to achieve more than one goal.

subsidy

The Baen Free Library <baen.com/library> is an example of the direct cross subsidy model. As Eric Flint, the "First Librarian" of the library writes, "I will make no bones about it. . . . We expect

this Baen Free Library to make us money by selling books. How? As I said above, for the same reason that *any* kind of book distribution which provides free copies to people has always, throughout the history of publishing, eventually rebounded to the benefit of the author."

For that matter, the innumerable writers who are posting previously published work on their websites are probably doing so in the hopes that you will look for their upcoming work in books or magazines. The best place to find who is giving away what in our little corner of literature is the amazing **Free Speculative Fiction Online** <freesfonline.de>. And then there are the legion of podcasters, many—but not all—of whom hope that by posting their audiofiction on sites like **Podio-books** <podiobooks.com> that they can entice listeners to buy their books or editors to buy their unpublished manuscripts.

three party markets

Google <google.com>, of course, is the eight-hundred-pound gorilla of internet advertising, which is how it can provide its incomparable free search engine. If you're Google-phobic for some reason, know that both **Yahoo** <yahoo.com> and Microsoft's latest effort, **Bing** <bing.com>, which finish second and third in the search sweepstakes, are also totally creatures of advertising.

Closer to home, popular blog **io9** <io9.com>, whose parent company is **Gawker Media** <advertising.gawker.com>, is filled with ads for genre movies and games, as befitting a media-centric site. And while some might accuse the site formerly known as **Scifi**, **Syfy** <syfy.com>, of being one huge commercial for its television parent, automobile and electronic advertisers think enough of its content to pay for ads there.

freemium

If you're like me, then you take a starshipload of digital photos, some of which

may be of interest to your family, friends, or even the world at large. I'm no great photographer, but I have some famous pals and I enjoy taking snaps of them. I share these with the world at **Flickr** <flickr.com/photos/jamespatrickkelly>. Now a free account at flickr is a pretty good deal, but I have opted to pay twenty-five dollars for the pro account, mostly so that I can have more than two hundred images accessible at a time.

As a sometime podcaster, I have had occasion to send humongous files via the net, files far too large to attach to email. With a free account on **YouSendIt** <yousendit.com>, I can send files as large as 100 mb with a monthly limit of 1gb. This is more than enough for me at the moment, although back when I was doing my StoryPod project on Audible, I regularly exceeded those limits and thus popped for the pro account at a cost of about a hundred dollars.

Although in its early days **Skype** <skype.com> often made your voice sound like a banjo, the price couldn't be beat. As long as you're calling another Skype user, it's still free. And these days it's one of the best ways to stay in touch by webcam. The videophone is no longer science fiction! Before I got a cell phone, I used to use Skype and a laptop as my on-the-road phone and paid extra for the privilege of calling landlines and mobiles.

sharenet

Chances are that you've never heard of the media player I use every day. The **VLC Media Player** <videolan.org/vlc> was developed by VideoLAN, a project run by volunteers who produce open source software. It's simple, bulletproof, and plays more formats than anything else I know. The folks at VideoLAN are part of the **Free Software Movement** <fsf.org> founded by **Richard Stallman** <stallman.org>. And here we come

to yet another kind of free, because free and open source software is not the same as freeware. Basically, freeware is free, but it can also be proprietary, in that the author put restriction on its use and can forbid any modifications and improvements. Free and open source software (FOSS) is not only free, but you can tinker with it and adapt it to your specific needs. I was interested to read that Anderson gives Stallman short shrift in his book. Stallman is a "fire-brand" guilty of "ideological extremism" whose "Free Software Foundation had been trying to push the movement toward his own anticapitalist views." And yet it seems to me that the altruism of Stallman and the Free Software Foundation is at least as potent a force on the net as the market forces that Anderson is describing.

We'll talk more about these matters in the next installment.

exit

If you want to consider Chris Anderson's arguments for yourself, I'm afraid that you'll have to pay for the dead tree version of *Free*—or else take it out from the library. He gave the e-version away for five weeks back in July; one hundred and seventy thousand copies were downloaded. Maybe you know someone who has one of them? Or you could read some of it in a limited preview on Google Books, but there are many pages omitted. Or you could read other bits of it on the **Wired site** <wired.com/techbiz/it/magazine/16-03/ff_free>, where it ran as an article in February 2008. Or you could hunt down a pirate version—just don't tell them Jim sent you.

Or you could listen to that unabridged version over on Audible at no cost. Let me check to see if it's still there. Wait, what's this? If you'd rather hear the abridged version, it will cost you \$18.89!

Is this some kind of joke? ○

William Preston's first two stories for *Asimov's*, "You Will Go to the Moon" (July 2006) and "Close" (February 2007) were about quiet, intense characters who found themselves in deceptively ordinary scenarios. In his latest tale, the author upsets any expectations we may have formed by plunging a character as bold as a pulp hero into an adventure where nearly everyone seems to be . . .

HELPING THEM TAKE THE OLD MAN DOWN

William Preston

1

When I married, late and surprised, I hadn't heard from the old man for about two years. I knew his assistants went through fallow periods, only to be suddenly summoned back into service. Having heard nothing formal, I considered myself retired rather than dismissed, but in truth I didn't know what to think. No contact was possible between me and my former peers, and to have simply shown up at the offices unbidden, out of the question. From my own time with the old man, I sensed some people simply aged out of service; others died, of course, and not only because the old man's career had spanned decades.

For most of those inactive months I believed he kept me in mind yet didn't need my specific talents. Perhaps what he'd termed "the Work" had progressed, though the world seemed just as fraught with troubles, even as the Cold War staggered to its undramatic close. Stories still surfaced about him; not front-page matter as had been the case mid-century. His exploits faded behind the conjoined twins of popular news—terrorism and celebrity, which seemed to me, trained in the study of human cultures, only exaggerated aspects of the same mortal vanities: the need to make a mark; the belief that you alone matter.

What allowed me to marry, in fact, was a growing sense that I'd invented the old man. Some three dozen adventures I'd had with him over ten years, but often I'd not known my own purposes, and sometimes the center of action proved to be several thousand miles from where I and other assistants were engaged. During that decade, the world appeared to be a gigantic machine, every human action tied to another and watched over by the old man, who seemed always intent on saving the planet, or some part of it, from destruction. The distance of years gave me a different impression: everything I'd done was either tangential or utterly beside the point. On quiet, solitary nights, scenes from that life came to me vividly; the rest of the time,

real life obtruded. I had, after all, no artifacts from those events except, on soggy days, a left leg that ached—and quarterly dividends from several South American mining companies.

And so love, personal intimacy, a household: these seemed saving graces—for Claire and me, if for no one else. When the sun swelled and drowned the inner planets, or when our fragile world with all its weapons went under in its own fires, there would at least have been our simple joys for a little while under the sky.

The morning after the wedding, Claire and I went through the presents at my Brooklyn apartment. Seated on the sofa, my legs stretched onto the coffee table, I jotted down each gift and giver as she reported them. She knelt on the other side of the room among the boxes.

"No name on this one," she said. Once, when my life bubbled with mysteries, that would have caught my interest, but I merely said, "Hm" and waited for her to say more. The wrapping paper was a flat silver; she tore it off and held up, so I could see, a brown box. The lid unsecured, she opened it and peered inside. "What are *you*?" she asked.

"What."

She pinched her brows together, then plucked out a bent piece of metal about the size of a cheese knife. Claire twisted her hand to change the angle. "It's signed," she said. "Or inscribed."

"What's it say?"

"Come see. My legs are numb."

I made a face and grunted to standing. I thought to say something about being old and hating to move, but the decade gap in our ages didn't seem like the best subject on such a day.

She held it out to me. I saw what she meant: a cryptic signature inscribed into the metal; above it, the word "Believe" stamped in block letters, followed by a date from ten years before. My eyes rolled upward to track the day, and I remembered the fal-lacious alien invasion, meant to conceal a program of human trafficking, and the craft we'd blown to blazes—mostly for our own satisfaction—in the desert outside Tempe. "Believe" indeed.

My wife asked, "Why are you smiling?"

2

In my first years of teaching, I played racquetball on courts near my department's offices in the city, always conscious that, as I struck and sweated, other men my age and younger, soaked in tropical humidity and damp fear in a foreign land, fought an indefatigable enemy for causes uncertain and obscure. Like most academics then, I pronounced my politics to my students; since the majority of students and faculty held the same views, this was hardly bravery, and might even have been a form of cowardice. Only once did I have the chance to truly perform something like a selfless act, and I suppose it was this as much as my considerable scholarship that brought me to the old man's attention.

I'd been lecturing to first-year anthropology students in a cold room of beige brick. The windows, most of them missing their blinds, were old and let in the winter; often, my eyes watered from all the white light behind the students, who sat in curved tiers.

I noticed the unfamiliar young man at the back because it wasn't that large a class.

Lecture done, he lingered, stepping down from each tier so gradually it was evident he was waiting for us to be alone.

"Can I help you?" He wasn't looking at me, but at the next step. "Young man?" His head came up.

He dawdled down the stairs until the last students were out the door and I'd gathered my satchel and gym bag from my chair.

"I'm here to deliver a message, Professor Lanagan."

"Is that so?"

"Really," he said, and held out a piece of paper. "My . . . boss likes people to connect in a personal way." He blinked at me as if he'd lost the right words. "Otherwise he'd have just sent you a letter."

The paper was folded twice. "What is this?"

"Please just read it."

I did. Twice. "Why would I take this seriously?"

"I also have information to deliver verbally," he said. "Last year, a student entered the offices of the financial aid department carrying an explosive device." Muscles in my midsection clenched. "You happened to be there at the time, having seen him arming the device while in the bathroom. You stopped him before he could proceed any farther, contained him, and contacted the police. You asked the authorities to keep you out of the story, which they did."

"How do you know that?"

He nodded at the paper, which I'd kept open. "Who else would know?" For the first time, his bland visage cracked: he gave a wry smile and tilted his head slightly toward the shoulder that shrugged. "He just knows everything. Anyway, that's the place and time, and there'll be other people to meet. So." He hesitated. "Nice to talk with you," he said, and left me standing there.

I stayed like that until I found myself looking at the paper's blank side—as if it contained a hidden message telling me how to proceed.

I never felt comfortable saying his name; such intimacy seemed less than appropriate. The nickname some of the early assistants, and the newspapers, applied didn't seem to suit him. Instead, I adopted the term employed by most of the assistants I'd met: the old man.

Stories—the pulpy ones I read as a teen, passed to me by my father, and the news pieces the wire services ran in our more global age—had provided me a picture, but actually being in his presence made the stories seem like hand shadows, cast dimly on a wall, aimed at telling tales of the gods.

Before he emerged, though, I met many of those who would be my compatriots.

"Slim Jim" Rogers introduced the others, all of whom sat on the arms of the chairs in the office, which looked like a library with a tremendous inlaid desk at one end. Slim Jim stood a few inches taller than I, and I was six feet. I noticed his long fingers, too, when he shook my hand.

"I'm mostly a language guy," he said, "but the military taught me some things about electronics and combat, so that's why the old man keeps me around." He opened his big hands flat.

"I see," I said, in the absence of a better response.

"You did some terrific work on the Tergen."

I looked at his mouth, then in his eyes again. "You've read those papers?" The rainforest-dwelling Tergen spoke one of the nearly nine hundred discrete languages particular to Papua New Guinea. Like many of their neighbors, the Tergen held tight to a language lacking antecedents connecting it to other Papuan languages, but even among the regional tongues it sounded unprecedented; theories about the Tergen's distinct development and origins abounded, some more in the realm of science fiction than philological or anthropological speculation. I had focused on their use of

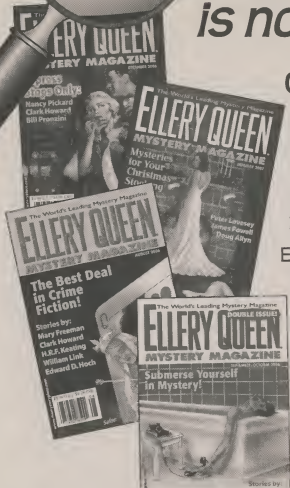
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natural sounds in the construction of their language: clicks and whistles that came from animals, a sound like rushing water on verbs of motion, and one phoneme like trees rubbing together. They were the most obscure people I'd studied. The work had come somewhat as an accident; I'd signed up with two other anthropologists tracking malarial propagation and treatment in the region.

"Not all, but enough," Slim Jim replied. "The old man has done some work there himself." He leaned toward me in mock confidentiality. "Nothing he's published, of course."

"Of course . . ."

"His father lived among them for a while, I'm told."

"... Really . . ."

"Panzer here—" he began, indicating a short-haired blond woman waiting to greet me.

"Christ!" she said. She had a German accent. "Can't someone learn my *real* name first?" Firmly shaking my hand, she hit Rogers on the shoulder with the open palm of her other hand. "This place is too much like a boys' club," she said.

By longstanding tradition nearly everyone was known by a nickname. Gerta "Panzer" Pruner, whose father had, not coincidentally, commanded a tank division in the war, never failed to roll her eyes or punch the speaker in the shoulder, hard, whenever her unwelcome moniker was applied. Weapons expert Arthur "Tice" Tiz-zarelli would later train me so that I could cause impermanent though disabling damage with our unique non-lethal firearms. He was the only companion from those times whom I saw outside of a mission, our few meetings arranged by the old man. Wu, the only one present that night who lacked a nickname, was a chemical engineer, as was his father, a victim of the Cultural Revolution.

I didn't know Panzer long. On our third mission together, she failed to open her parachute and plummeted into the heart of a dark forest. Nothing was wrong with the equipment. It had been an unlikely mistake, especially for someone trained by the East Germans, and I wondered, given her moods, whether she hadn't chosen the time of her demise.

"Mairzy," Mary Czekaj, joined a few months after that first meeting, and I unsubtly harbored a bit of a crush on her. If we'd seen each other more often, maybe it would have developed into something. I knew that my attraction was largely the result of shared intense experiences, so I felt mature in dismissing my feelings which, in addition, seemed improper.

As for "the old man"—by the time I'd come along, someone had turned it into an acronym, "Tom." Wu and Tice had, rarely, taken to calling him that. The first time I heard Tice do it, the old man didn't even blink, so it must have already been established. His real name surfaced on occasion. Often, strangely, there was no need to address him personally; you began to speak to him and found him looking at you already.

Evidently, information about me had been broadly disseminated in advance. Panzer asked about some papers of mine the State Department had put to use, and my answers were unforthcoming not from humility but surprise that anyone would care.

I was starting to ask Wu about the library's availability—I'd spotted some volumes in my own field—when Tice said, "Evening, old man."

It unnerved me, how someone that large could have entered without my feeling the air displace; an opening at his back, just to one side of the desk, slid shut before I got anything more than a glimpse of yellow light on a wood-panelled wall. His mildly furrowed brow made me think he already wondered why I'd been selected for his team; later, I'd realize this wasn't a look of worry, but of focus. Once our eyes locked, he held me only for a moment. It would be a commonplace to say the moment lengthened. It did not; rather, it deepened, and I plummeted and had to steady myself. I suppose I felt myself tumbling into an unguessed-at future.

Though the old man wore only trousers and a loose beige shirt, sleeves rolled, showing the massive though magnificently tapering forearms, in my patch-elbowed corduroy jacket I felt underdressed for the occasion, and my hair, nearly to my collar in those years, seemed a horrible breach of etiquette. His own hair was nearly colorless, though it was hard to tell, so closely was it cropped, the bronzed tone of his head predominating. From what I knew of his history, he must have been around seventy, but except for wrinkles that looked to be the result of sun exposure, he appeared middle-aged.

Relatively speaking, I suppose he was.

His voice rumbled, "You've met the others," though he barely opened his mouth. I stared at his lips and didn't answer. A punch on the shoulder woke me, and I looked at Slim Jim, who barked a laugh and tilted his head as if to say, "Now you see how things are."

The old man hadn't moved an iota. "Yes, sir," I said.

"They're quite a group." His eyes flicked about to touch on them all, with some bemusement, I thought, and everyone laughed lightly and stepped closer to the desk.

"You know something of what we do," he said.

"Yes. Yes, of course."

"Do you think you'd want to work with us?"

I hesitated. Slim Jim tilted close. "Don't worry about the details, Lanny." And so my own nickname was set. "Everything's taken care of from here on out. Trust me. Well," his head bobbed, "trust *him*."

I managed to say, "I'll do what I can."

Now the old man moved, smoothly, in a way that didn't match his size, to slide a fat brown volume from the wall of books behind his desk. He settled the book while opening it, then quickly found the proper page. I'd noticed the fountain pen in its holder; with his left hand, he snatched the pen and tested it on the desk's blotter. In letters somewhat like print, but joined together, he noted something in the unlined pages of the book; propriety kept me from studying it closely. I thought I saw the letters of my name.

He looked up, sweeping the group into his gaze. "Let's discuss our next mission. Time is short." He slid the pen back into its sheath.

3

Much of what the least credulous believed to be untrue about the old man's adventures was, instead, true. The old stories, though injected with excess melodrama, nevertheless made some of the strangest adventures seem less strange. Only the mundane details were wrong, altered because the old man's companions—or whoever passed on those stories—knew enough to shield such details from the common eye. What if the old man's actual headquarters had been discovered? What if the press traced us to our jobs? What if the beneficiaries of the old man's attentions were named and made the subjects of official focus—when official action had already proven useless or unavailable? And so a quotidian substructure of lies supported an utterly authentic architecture of the fantastic.

And for all the arcane weirdness most people associated with the old man, even our most bizarre cases had rational explanations—though I must say that my idea of "rational" expanded profoundly while in the old man's service.

A flag on a nondescript building visible from my apartment informed me of my first few meetings. The flag at half-staff meant I was summoned. A bit morbid, I thought. My compatriots found out in other ways: a copy of an out-of-town newspa-

per delivered; a drape drawn in a nearby window. The old man couldn't have done all this himself; he'd tasked others, and since the methods changed every few months, both in venue and style, and in the complexity needed to carry them out, he must have had a host of people upon whom to call.

In time, I appreciated what this meant. Engaged in secret activities that took me across the globe, I thought myself to be among a special breed. I was not. Whereas at first I'd passed along the city streets or ridden the subway with a feeling of detachment from those around me, later I looked at my fellows as if any of them might hide secrets of equal magnitude.

Maybe we were all in on it.

How people with problems found their way to the old man remained something of a mystery. He didn't advertise. Although some of our cases gained public notice and you could catch glimpses of us in grainy photos, in the age before the internet, we remained private, if not truly hidden. When we'd get summoned for a case, more often than not someone was waiting with the old man in the office. She or he would repeat a summary of events, then the old man would ask a few questions, send the guest to the outer office, get our reactions, and propose a plan of action. Then one of us would usher the person back to the elevator. In the earlier building, we had a private lift and our own floor; the gold plaque outside our entry said "Azimuth Enterprises: Search and Salvage," but in the lobby, the name didn't appear on the black felt. Later, in Tower Two, we shared the floor with some other offices and met in more modest rooms behind an unmarked door.

There must have been people out there whose sole job was to listen, to attune themselves to the sound of a human in need. They'd home in on the direst signal and push the person in the old man's direction. Yet how did he choose which cases to take? Surely the wail of suffering must have reached those high offices even without the aid of others. And of course, he walked among us. He'd studied, near as I could tell, in every field of human endeavor. (He even had a fine singing voice, displayed once in my hearing at a party in Monte Carlo that ended with the host hog-tied and a kidnapping foiled.) It was as if time functioned differently for him. How else to explain his breadth of knowledge, his resources, his many involvements? He lived at a different speed; he lived between seconds like a man pausing a reel of film to consider every frame. He had all the time in the world—all the time *and* all the world.

But were we really doing all we could to stem the tide of evil? It was on this question that my own awful decision would finally turn.

A few times, we went into situations armed. Small caliber weapons only, some loaded with rubber bullets; the old man didn't want any avoidable deaths, but violence in self-defense—enough violence to stop someone—was expected. As for himself, he never used a gun. A master of disabling the most solidly built enemy with a single blow, the old man believed in the nobility of the human spirit but saw the human body as a machine rife with "off" switches.

I expressed my amazement once, only to have the old man fix me with a look and say, "Want to know how it feels?" His wit was so dry, I'm not sure it's right to label it wit. I declined his offer, and he bent as if the question hadn't been asked, gathering from the concrete floor the saboteur who'd meant to bring down a nuclear plant.

Not much more than a year after I'd married, in the city to attend a lecture and have lunch with a former university colleague, I ducked into a used book store to get out of a pounding late-afternoon rain that kept whipping under my frail umbrella. Not wanting to appear merely mercenary in my use of the shop—and certainly open

to the possibility of a purchase—I strode with feigned assuredness to the rear of the store. There, the smell of rain seemed to have gathered, so that the farther in I went, the closer I seemed to get to the source of the storm. I passed between rows of shelves that reached nearly to the ceiling, then turned toward a back corner.

There he stood, the old man, raindrops marking his steel-gray trench coat, his bulk and stillness mastering the tight space. He held a small book open in one hand.

"Hello, Lanny," he said without looking up, possibly without moving his mouth. That famed ability to throw his voice—did he practice it even when he wasn't about the business of confounding some villain?

"Sir," I said, even after all our time together.

Then, shutting his book, he gave me his full attention. "Ever read any Anselm?"

"I don't believe so."

He waved the little volume before slipping it back into a space in the shelves. "To some people, the unseen world is just as present as the visible world." He passed me a faint grin. "One needs reminding."

I wondered whether he meant only himself, since he'd been doing the reading, or whether he meant me—any of us who neglect the life of the spirit. In my silence, I heard the rain on the street—the door to the shop was open all this time—and I felt that the visible world was full enough.

The old man asked after my wife, told me to take care, and then left. I forgot to thank him for his gift. I wondered if the volume he'd held contained a message, but then I couldn't find the spot where he'd replaced it, and perhaps it hadn't been a volume of Anselm in any case, but a writer referring to Anselm, or someone who reminded him of Anselm. The old man's thinking had always been a mystery.

I thought of that shop a decade later when the towers came down. Living hours from the city, I watched from the safety of my sofa as the collapse pushed a gray cloud of debris down that very street; I read later that the shop had been one into which people had fled from the terror. How sharply that connection resurfaced when the authorities came to me for help in tracking down the old man.

4

Our town has a little sandwich shop where I often stop on my morning walks. Cold days, sloppy days, I put on boots and a coat and head there while Claire stays dozing or sits in bed reading. I usually pocket something to read in my coat.

Mid-November, on a morning hazy with fog, I'd just started in on Camus when a man dragged over a chair to join me at my minute table.

"Mind?" he asked. He set down a gray homburg, which heightened both my curiosity—who wore a hat these days?—and hostility—why didn't he leave the chair at the other table? He took in the face I presented him with and squinted around the whole diner. "Pleasant," he offered by way of evaluation. His trench coat came off next, and I saw that it was unlined, a coat for warmer climes. I turned to look out the front glass and saw a car in one of the angled slots at the curb, squarish and American; I believe the man in the passenger's seat looked back at me.

I let my book close, assessing the situation as I had not done in years. "What's this about?"

He had trouble finding the right distance from the table for his chair. It rumbled back and forth on the tile, and until he got it right and seated himself, he didn't answer. I had put down Camus and tensed my legs. The only hard object within reach was the sugar dispenser, three-quarters full, which would do. The chairs stood on

runners rather than legs and could be easily flipped by a push at the front. Then there was the man in the car to consider . . . but my companion already had one hand in the pocket of his suit jacket. The jacket was open and fit loosely, so I could see that what he began to withdraw wasn't a weapon.

"I'm with the National Security Agency," he said, producing a wallet. He used both hands to open it. I read his credentials; his name was Ruxby. "Or I was. Really I'm with another department that hasn't been officially formed yet. It's a changed world, Mr. Lanagan."

"Is it?"

He frowned at his wallet. "I think so, yes."

"I don't." I judged him about thirty-five. "A young person's memory isn't much to go on."

He finally met my eyes. "I appreciate what you're saying." He half stood and used one hand to scoot his chair forward, then sat again. "But people's . . . people's faith in things, that's been shaken. That's changed. Our sense of being safe."

"What is it you want from me?"

He nodded. "We want to contact your former employer."

I gave a half smile. "I was never *employed* by him."

"Okay," he said to the table. "Okay. We both know you've been compensated in some way, but okay. The thing is," and here his head came up, "we think he could be an enormous help to us at this time."

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, that's our thinking. Would you know how to contact him?"

"No, I wouldn't. And no," I continued, anticipating his next obvious question, "I wouldn't tell you if I did, but it's the truth."

His gaze shunted back and forth between my eyes, as if comparing them.

"Do you have some reason to distrust your government, Mr. Lanagan?"

"No more than anyone else," I said.

"All right," he said, too soon, and picked up his hat by the crease. "Well, if you have some idea where he might be, or if he contacts you, please let me know." He produced a card that he pressed to the table. I didn't touch it. He rose, his chair grinding back, then lifted his coat from the wall hook. "Maybe I'll see you again."

"The world is full of wonders," I said, and he gave me the look I wanted, one with a hint of pique.

Only after that car had pulled away did I pick up his card. My coffee was cold, and I couldn't summon the energy to open my book again. On my way out, I crushed the card and dropped it in the trash.

Of course Claire and I had talked about my adventures; in bed at night, she'd ask me to regale her as she tucked against me. I had some thirty-plus stories to choose from, some more worth telling than others, relative to my proximity to the key events. I wished I'd kept some kind of record. Instead, I had unclear memories that mixed stories and left out decisive moments that I'd only recall when I neared a climax. Added to this were the stories I'd read in my youth, and sometimes, I'm sure, those supplied scenes that held together my fragmented tales.

"I'm so bad at this," I said on more than one occasion.

Usually she dismissed this complaint and urged me onward. Once she said, "That's part of the charm. They're like stories from another life. Stories people pass on. They don't always hold together. But they mean something. They mean something to the people telling them."

I looked up toward the ceiling, unfocused, as if I could see farther. "But what do they mean to you?"

She thought about this only for a moment. "People's lives can have purpose," she said.

The day I met Ruxby, I didn't say a word about it until we'd settled in for the night. It happened to be a night when she asked me to tell her something about the old man, asked whether there was something I hadn't told her before. Instead I told her about my interrupted breakfast. By the time I finished, she was sitting up in bed, clutching her pillow to her chest.

"So you're not going to help?"

"Is that what you think I should do?"

"I just asked what you were *going* to do."

"He said something about compensation, compensation from the old man. He knows I get money from the mines. He knows we all get it. They could come after those assets, everybody's assets. *We'd* be fine. Not the others, necessarily. And maybe they wouldn't stop there."

I watched her breathe in and out, twice. "All I asked," she said, exasperated, "was what you're *going* to do."

I avoided answering. "It's beside the point. The old man is dead."

Claire studied me. "Why do you think he's dead?"

I made a wry, unpleasant face. "What *year* is it?"

Those of us who spent any time in his company talked about his age. We had theories: the old man was *not* the same man who'd had all those famous adventures in the thirties and forties; genetic mutation made possible both his intelligence and longevity; the reason he disappeared for weeks at a time was to immerse himself in some revitalizing fluids in his Arctic redoubt.

Allan "Randy" Randolph's pet theory arose during a card game on a freighter deck. "Look at me," he said, a smooth-skinned black man, very dark. He'd been an engineer with NASA and retired to New York, where his wife had opened a high-end jewelry store.

"What about you?" I asked.

"How old do I look?"

"Forty," said Mairzy, holding her cards under her chin.

"Mm-hm," he said, turning his head as if to admire himself in the mirrors of our eyes. "Not younger?"

"Less than forty," allowed Mairzy, and we all laughed. Tice put down the book he was reading. We were all waiting for the old man to emerge from a discussion with the captain. The ship would be making a detour.

"Fine," said Randy. "I'll take it."

Mairzy proffered, "And you're fifty—"

"Seven," he said. "Fifty-seven. And our boss is how old?"

"Round about seventy-five," said Tice, stepping into the little group. "He had to be at least twenty-five when his career started in thirty-three, but he was probably thirty."

"So it's obvious," said Randy. "He's got some black blood." He passed his hand down his face. "Figure it: the complexion, the smooth face. The *voice*—that voice has *soul*." To our laughter, he responded with his profile. "I'll look just as good at seventy."

We never found out how Randy would look at seventy. He died two years later. Heart attack while swimming at the Y. The old man made sure we knew about the funeral service; there were no calling hours.

The scene was a narrow Methodist church wedged between two much-taller concrete structures on the East Side. I saw some of my friends when I came in, but figured it wouldn't do to sit together. At the rear of the church, a broad-shouldered figure sat hunched forward. The hair was the wrong color, and he wore small glasses, and his jaw looked lopsided somehow, but I'd swear it was the old man. When the funeral party passed by at the end, I saw that he'd gone.

After the service, we all gathered by a table stacked with hymnals in the back. I remember Wu saying, "Not every problem is solvable through the application of intellect and force." I had a terrible vision of myself as Randy, feeling the heart attack mid-pool, punching against the water, feeling the numbness spread through my limbs, my body going down and the strange lights below the world of sound and sensation overtaking me.

5

Ruxby and his hat made another appearance at the bakery, this time as I stood on line. "I wasn't staying," I told him.

"Do it anyway," he said. "I'll be over here." He chose the same table as before.

Ruxby wanted to know when I'd last seen the old man, and I told him about the bookstore. It was the truth, and the story seemed harmless. Perhaps I'd be left alone if that was all I had to offer. He sat back in his chair when I'd finished. He asked for the store's location, and something about how he nodded made me think I knew his thoughts—so I followed up by saying how that street had been a flight path for pedestrians when the towers fell.

"You used to meet at the offices in the World Trade Center."

Of course this was a secret, but with the towers gone . . .

"Tower Two," I said into my coffee. Four bubbles clung in a little group to the edge of the mug. "He'd had other offices before that. I only saw him a few times there."

"Sure. Sure. But you know something? This you'll find interesting." He scooted the chair forward. "He moved out of those Tower Two offices one month before the attack." I kept my head down, but his hand came within view across the table, gliding over the surface. "One," he said, tapping down next to my mug. "Month," he said, and tapped once more.

I sipped my coffee. I felt the little bubbles that had held on slide down my throat.

"You're drawing a conclusion from that," I said.

"With someone like your boss, that decision was no coincidence." Why did he smile throughout this? What about it was enjoyable? "It means something."

Already, this business had exhausted me. "Why does it have to *mean* something?"

"Come on. I've heard the stories. Sometimes it was like the old man knew what was coming."

"You said it: stories. You've heard stories."

He pursed his lips and squinted with his right eye, as if he were actually thinking about this. "That's why we've come to you. You know what's behind the stories. You and your old friends. So we're looking to find out what he knew. What he knows. How he knows what he knows."

"What he knows?"

"Yeah."

"You're saying he's alive."

"I'm saying he's alive. Yes. That's what I'm saying. You're saying he isn't?"

"I have no idea. I haven't heard. It's been years—"

"You've just been cut off is all. The old man doesn't talk to you any more."

"That's his way."

"Sure. That's his way. Comes and goes. Giant mystery."

I summed up my thinking. "He only seemed to know the future sometimes because he understood the present. He understood people and where their actions might lead. He was a genius. A genius and a man of action."

"Yeah. Agreed. Agreed. So: What did he know that we didn't? What did he know that could've saved those people?"

This prompted long-buried reflections on the old man's purposes. Active during WWII, he'd caught saboteurs and spies and people building even wilder bombs than the ones the Americans had built, but he hadn't stopped the slaughter of the Jews. Why? Was he powerless? Despots, both major and minor, and much mid-century suffering—all had been present when the old man was at the height of his visibility. Had the supplications of the innocent been so manifold that they overwhelmed him? Did he know something we didn't about the workings of the world, staving off even greater terrors than those that fleshed out history books? Wu had said once, "The old man doesn't toil in those fields," leaving me to think that the realm of war and international affairs lay beyond his scope. But this latest attack—this he could have prevented. These were the kinds of actions we often tried to stop: schemes to bring civilization to its knees; the works of madmen; evil at its most demonstrative. Parochial as I knew my thinking to be, I felt he surely could have prevented this assault on our old city, had he been alive, or capable.

Like anybody else, I played out in my head, then and now, at odd times, scenes from within the towers or the planes: there's always blossoming fire. Sometimes, the end comes quickly. Sometimes I stumble through smoke and confusion, the search for an exit. Never in any of these terrible fantasies am I among those who survive. Always, at the end, the world comes crashing inward, collapsing to a point where both silence and darkness are absolute.

"What will you do if I don't cooperate?"

"We need this information. You are among the few people we know of with access to it."

"My family. You're threatening my family."

Still looking down at the table, his eyes went wide and he blinked rapidly. He laughed once, like a cough in his chest, then raised his eyes to me. "Mr. Lanagan, we're not monsters. Neither your wife nor your mother is a threat to national security. You are. Your former colleagues are. We'll be talking to them. The ones still around, anyway."

"You think I won't let them know you're coming?"

He shrugged. "Let them know. Maybe one of them will think this through differently than you're doing and decide to help us. But it's true, we may have to use other methods than," and here he swept his hand through the air to indicate the bakery, this public method for mining information, a soft approach, "what we've done here today," he concluded.

"No one will help you."

"Someone will tell us something."

"People will lie."

He nodded his head to the side. "Conceivably. You didn't lie. You don't know where he is. I believe you. Maybe no one knows. But you know something, something to make this simpler for everyone." I watched his eyes move about as if he were thinking. Then he said, "Don't hesitate to contact the others."

I loosed a burst of laughter right at his face. They thought I would betray my colleagues—when, in fact, I didn't even know how to reach them. Having regained some sense that I had the upper hand, I showed my cards. "We didn't even *know* each other outside the old man. He brought us together. Apart—we were never in touch."

This wasn't entirely true. There'd been those few times with Tice.

"Blaine," he said. "The woman's phone number."

"I—Who's—"

Ruxby looked off to the right. He took a pen and card from his jacket pocket and bent over the table. Then I realized he was listening. All along, our conversations had

been monitored from the car. He carefully formed the numbers on the card and read them back. "Right? Thanks." He stood and put away his pen. "There's Mary Czekaj's phone number. And this is my card again, in case you lost the first one." I must have been staring at what he'd written. "We know where every one of you lives, the few who are left. There's only one person hiding."

I recovered my voice and said, "Just because you can't find him doesn't mean he's hiding."

"Fair enough. But in times like these, mine isn't the burden of proof. What can I say?" And with that, he left. When I picked up the card I saw that he'd tucked a ten under his saucer, enough to cover us both.

On the walk home, I considered who they'd contact next and wondered who, of those I'd known, remained. Mairzy wouldn't tell them anything. If she knew they were coming . . .

In a cufflink box in my dresser, I still kept the capsule. Mairzy, Wu, and I had been given them by a double agent helping us infiltrate a mountain-dwelling warlord on the Lao-Thai border. In case our covers as drug-running Americans were blown, we might have wanted to avoid the inevitable torture and simply end the pain. The old man's brow tightened as we pocketed our poisons. Clearly, he'd never resort to such measures himself, nor succumb to torture.

Before we'd set out, the old man said, "It'll never come to that. I'll have you all in my sights and extract you at the first sign of trouble."

As it turned out, we quickly learned what we needed to know, the old man and some sympathetic Hmong staged a nighttime assault, and we escaped in the resulting confusion.

Mairzy would have kept the capsule, as I had—as a souvenir, but also because the old man had taught us to be prepared for any eventuality.

"Mairzy?"

A long pause. "Who is this?"

"This is Lanny."

"Hello?" she said before I'd finished.

"I think there's something—"

"Oh shit," she said. "What's happened?"

I waited a moment, then said, "This connection is strange."

Again I waited. "My phone is being tapped," she said. "But I've got this tricky little device. The old man gave it to me years ago. Reroutes everything so the caller can't be traced. And it screws with their listening."

"Well, that explai—"

"Yours must be tapped too. They—yes, that explains the delay. So. Wait. Where are you calling from?"

"I'm home. I'm calling from home."

"I'm telling you, you're tapped. They can probably hear your end of things."

"It doesn't matter," I said, pressing the phone closer to my face as if it did and as if that accomplished anything. I paused.

"This number is unlisted. How did you—"

I forgot to allow for the timing delay. "Listen, they're looking—"

"Oh, goddammit, Lanny. What have you done?"

"I haven't—"

"I'm sure they are," she said, "but I don't know a damned thing."

"I haven't done anything. I'm calling to warn you. Obviously, I didn't think this through. It doesn't matter. They know where we all are."

"I won't even talk to them."

"The times," I heard myself say, "are different." My voice echoed a bit in my ear, as if it hadn't gone very far and simply bounced off a wall.

"Some things are constant," she said.

"The old man is probably dead, so this could be a pointless argument."

"No. If he'd died, we'd know. The world," she said, and waited so long I thought the call had been cut off, but then she concluded, "wouldn't make as much sense."

"It makes sense?" I asked. I imagined my wife, out shopping, returning to stand in the sun-bright space by the sink. I saw her unpack the groceries, adjust her reading glasses as she studied the register tape. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out, because everything we'd said, for years, was overheard and recorded. Men could come to my house and take her away, separate us. This was the world now—and this was the world we'd always lived in. I said to Mairzy, softly, "I wanted to warn you."

"And I want to warn you," she said, and then the call *did* end.

In all my years with the old man, what good did I do? Pretty much every case left me asking that, and pride pushed me, eventually, to consider every member of the group in light of that question. Sometimes the value of someone was evident. Other times . . . I didn't question the old man, though, and most of the time, I was busy with my actual job.

Midway through my career with the old man, I raised the question with Mairzy. We'd been paired in a sojourn into a warren of caves. Conversing was hard: echoes, goggled eyes, the sweeping lamps of our helmets. "What exactly am I doing here?"

"Ha. What are any of us doing here?"

"No. I mean specifically me. I mean, I'm a professor. I write books. My specialty . . . you know my specialty. There are cases when the old man doesn't call me in at all."

"Just last month—"

"Right. For example. So there are cases where I'm clearly not needed. Then there are cases like this. I do what the old man tells me. I pull my weight. But . . . this isn't my skill set. My particular focus in life. It's not being utilized here."

We stopped to lean against damp walls, opposite each other in a narrowing passage. In the headlamp beam, I could see the sweat running from under Mairzy's caving helmet, and I felt the wetness running down my own face. I thought of the formation of limestone, the way liquids become solid, and by some reversal of process I imagined us both being reduced to pools by this adventure. Something crucial was taking place, something unseen.

"Here, you want an answer? You're good in a scrape. How's that?"

"No good."

"I tried," she said flatly, so much so that I couldn't tell whether she was joking.

"I think I can objectively say that I'm not pulling my weight," I said.

"You're so wrong," said Mairzy. "Don't you see that?"

"What," I said, putting out an open hand, as if she could deposit an explanation in my palm.

"The old man knows you better than you know yourself. Sure, you've got your studies, your papers, whatever. Your day job. I've got mine too. But who we are . . . that's what the old man utilizes. He knows what he needs. He knows our true skills. They aren't the skills that make us money, maybe. But they serve the Work."

The Work. I felt my heartbeat and heard us breathing in the deep underground channel. I took a moment to slow my breathing. When she saw I was ready, Mairzy asked, "Okay?" and I replied in kind, and we proceeded in search of a passageway to a world we never did find.

If the old man knew our strengths, he knew as well our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, how our humanity functioned. He knew what we would do in a given circumstance. I somehow found that comforting as I phoned Ruxby. Comfort also came from the thought that, if our beliefs in the old man were true, then he would never have allowed the attacks, and so he must be dead. If he was alive, as Ruxby insisted . . . So I would meet him and tell him everything I knew—really, the only thing I knew that might be of any use.

6

The old man rehabilitated those he caught. Sometimes, their crimes were beyond prosecution by any judicial body: the evidence was scant, or their unbelievable schemes were better off left concealed from the common view. We all knew the stories about what he did with these people.

Half a dozen years after marrying, I saw an old enemy, The Dismantler, at a theme park, holding the hand of a small child. This man's specialty was devices that took apart buildings, planes—what have you—from the inside out. Any villain of more ordinary fascinations would have planted bombs; the Dismantler's tools analyzed how a thing was put together and undid its assemblage as if time's arrow were running backward. I have no idea of the mechanics of these devices. Their true horror was that they took the measure of whatever they encountered, so when a pair of squatters found a cache of these little box-like monstrosities just as they were activating, another trespasser saw through a window exactly what happens when a person is undone bone by bone.

The old man conjured a flashlight-styled contraption that put out a strobing yellow beam meant to befuddle the Dismantler's weapons. Our raid on his subterranean headquarters was quite a light show, though my memories of the attack are visual fragments. Nightmarish, that event. When we all stood around the Dismantler above ground, in a fallow field, the old man kneeling on his back, I felt we'd returned from the underworld with a demon.

Seeing him years later, my first instinct was to rush him, knock him down. Instead, I froze with inaction.

"What is it?" Claire asked.

"That man."

"You know him?"

I studied the little group, which I saw, as my sense of the scene widened, also included a woman and a stroller. They were standing on line for a ride. The man laughed at something the woman said, caught me looking, glanced my way, gave a genial smile to someone he believed was merely reacting to his amusement, then turned his attention back to the woman.

"Honey? You know him?"

"Not any more," I answered, and took my wife's hand with some desperation.

Surely it wasn't that easy to make a terrible man—a sociopathic man—good. Surely the old man didn't simply put people under the knife and slice away whatever kept them from being moral. That didn't seem like how he'd work. The process would have been more . . . humane. More personal.

Whatever the process, didn't doctors do the same with pills: patch over the chemical or genetic wound in someone's personality? We were not made perfect, any of us. And what did free will mean to a person obsessed, a person who had inherited a trait for sadism, someone whose early life had perhaps been a string of torments? Under the

old man's care, then, such a person would, for the first time, have a will that was free. Though just how free was mine?

Whatever the process, rumor ran that the old man committed these surgical acts in his Arctic stronghold, what he referred to as "my northern retreat" and Slim Jim called "Camp Iceberg."

I'd been taken only once, but understood that the old man spent a great deal of time there when he wasn't on a case. We arrived after a plane ride to a small Canadian town followed by what amounted to a high-speed subway trip, traveling beneath the tundra in a tunnel constructed—when? by whom? The old man hadn't accomplished such a massive engineering feat on his own. It was like no subway I'd ridden; frictionless, it reminded me of the pneumatic tubes that carried mail in old office buildings.

We emerged in a cold chamber sealed off from the rest of the structure. Inside, I caught only glimpses of the overall design: under a domed, distant ceiling lay rooms within rooms, a kind of funhouse approach with multiple openings off every room, every doorway showing split passages to other spaces, and all of it decorated in such a spartan style, nothing stood out against the ice-blue walls. Several rooms held books on sparse shelves, rugs and pillows for seating; we paused in the kitchen, where the old man threw down frozen slabs of fish, a meal for later, before leading us to an armory, gathering gear, and taking us then to the vehicles.

We rode two-man snowmobiles onto the packed surface, our eyes protected by thick goggles that pressed too hard against my cheekbones. I looked back and saw that we had emerged from the side of a small mountain.

The next day, having retrieved both the beacon and the two silent men we'd sought—both of them now slung unconscious across the old man's vehicle—we returned by the exact same path from our polar adventure. I saw the features of the landscape more clearly then: the abrupt tower of ice, the plains of utter white on either side, a range of mountains like a sine wave in the distance.

Ruxby met me at my summons. Snow had fallen late the previous day, and the morning's slippery walkways slowed my progress. Turning the corner near the bakery, I paused to catch myself on the brick wall, then saw Ruxby emerge from the passenger's side of his car; I avoided studying the other figure within.

I told Ruxby what I knew. He had me estimate size and distances. Two days later, I ducked into the back of his car. The other man was nowhere about. Ruxby opened his computer to show me satellite pictures and movable 3D renderings of the gray wastes and irruptions from those pictures. Three possible locations had been identified.

"That's it," I said of the second one, and seeing it, even like this, I felt the sled bouncing across the white land and the great joy of working for the old man that had filled me that day. And I also felt the terrible cold of that place. It snuck inside you like an assassin's blade. For days after that adventure, I'd not been fully warm. Now I felt it again, the cold that wouldn't leave.

Ruxby shut the computer.

"You're coming too," he said, then waited for me to leave the car.

7

That time of year, that far north, dictated our landing in the dark. No one discussed strategy with me. For all I knew, they would have preferred a daylight assault, men all dressed in white and invisible against the snow and sky, or coming in

at twilight when shapes and movement became uncertain. But unless they had some invisibility equipment, like that screen the Lord of the Black Rains used to conceal his Amazonian lair, the old man would have spotted them in any case, in any light.

Clutching the straps that held me against the wall of the transport, under a helmet that dampened the sound, I felt a mixture of fear and bemusement, surrounded by highly armed men but half-convinced of the entire effort's futility. If he was alive, if he was at the Arctic stronghold, if he wasn't alerted to their approach . . . They were constructing a fictional narrative, and none of the plot points were believable. The closest I'd ever come to stories like this were in my time with the old man, and even those cases rarely played out in real life as perfectly or dramatically as these people seemed to imagine this would play out.

When the plane shuddered, the soldier next to me said, "Little turbulence." He had to shout to be heard, and though he'd turned my way, he had his eyes shut. His mouth worked in an exaggerated way to chew his gum.

Ruxby, suited like the others in thick, dark fabric, swaying from strap to strap like a man moving down the body of a subway train, approached me, then waited until I acknowledged him.

"What?" I said, shouting over the high whine of the engines.

"I don't want him hurt," Ruxby called back, the plane jostling him. "I don't want anyone hurt."

"If you say so."

"I say so. Look." He dropped to one knee and took hold of my shoulder strap to keep himself from pitching about. "Last chance to wrack your memory. Were there other exits?"

"Everything I know," I said, "I've told you. But the old man . . ." I looked away, at the curving transport walls and the men depending from them, locked in their own thoughts. "No one knows what he knows," I concluded.

"We'll take out the tunnel right when we hit the retreat." His eyes focused past me, picturing what would take place. "Then it should be too late."

What could I say? Ruxby watched me watch him for a few moments, then got up and staggered away.

We came down on the ice more smoothly than I thought possible. When the rear of the plane whined open, the military men filed out while I dawdled with my straps.

Ruxby appeared again at my side and removed my helmet.

"We're two miles away," he said. "I want you in the second vehicle. You've seen this from the outside, so you're best equipped to tell us where to enter."

"I drew you a diagram," I said.

"I still want your eyeballs." It sounded like a threat.

Weak from the trip—and from more than the trip—I watched him unharness me, then watched my legs lift me to standing. "Wait," I said. "What vehicles?"

Only when I stepped from the ramp at the rear of the plane, feeling myself shat upon the ice, lit by beams from inside our plane, did I learn that there was another transport. A hundred yards away, the ramp to a second plane dropped, and out rolled a pair of two-part tank-treaded vehicles for moving across the ice.

Several inches of snow had recently fallen, powdery and dry, and my boot went in up to the top of the laces. The soldiers dashed across the distance, snow notwithstanding. I was reminded of my one desert adventure with the old man, hunting for the remains of a lost German Panzer brigade. It involved a family secret and stolen paintings, though I confess the convolutions of the plot lost me, or didn't interest me. Watching out for other forces engaged in the search, Mairzy, a few steps ahead, caught sight of metal. To run on the dunes was something like trying to maneuver here.

Ruxby grabbed my arm. "Wait," he said, and he pointed as both vehicles headed our way. One stopped for the men from our plane, while the other continued closer, giving off a suppressed roar. As the other vehicle moved off, wind lifted the powder from its wake and threw it fifty yards into my face.

The snow rover proceeded with unnerving steadiness. I sat in the cab, between the driver and Ruxby, all our eyes on the other vehicle ahead, headed straight for the blue-white glacial flank.

"It was supposed to be overcast," said Ruxby.

"He's not even here," I said, managing some firmness.

"Oh, you're wrong about that."

"It's a tomb now," I said. "If he came here, he came to die."

"You know," said Ruxby, "it's not like you're privy to all the information I have," and his confidence kept me from saying more.

The Case of the Leviathan: my second year with the old man. I thought a vast inland lake on a volcanic archipelago had taken him. From the depths, a white tentacle—was it flesh or steel?—slid up, evident in the unnaturally clear water. The old man must have taken a breath before it yanked him down, though it snatched him before Mairzy could even exhale the breath that became a scream. Slim Jim grabbed a crowbar from the truck and dove in from the abrupt edge. Though the water was clear, the light was wrong to see too far. We all swore and shouted. We called out plans of action.

Only a minute must have passed before the water bubbled. The old man shot up from the water, emerging waist-high as if propelled, and when he bobbed downward we heard a gasp and saw Slim Jim come up at the ends of the old man's arms. The old man released him and they both swam to the ledge-like shore.

"Help Slim Jim," the old man directed, his voice echoing across the still lake, and we did as we were told. Slim Jim had lost the crowbar and torn his shirt around the shoulder. Wu worked the shirt off, revealing a vicious gash. Someone else fetched the first aid kit.

"Good work, everyone," said the old man. His breast pocket glowed. He'd found the crystal he'd sought for forty years. "Sorry for the scare." He caught all our eyes, not pausing, and strode past us to the jeeps.

Later I learned that this was something of a tradition: leaving his assistants to believe he'd finally met his end, then shocking them with his miraculous survival. Sometimes he stretched out the performance past the point of hope, though I never saw that myself.

Sitting beside Ruxby, I thought how this time he'd strung us along for years. He hadn't just survived an attack of superhuman force, an explosion at close range, a plunge from a shelf of rock; this time, he'd outlasted mortality itself. Only something mundane had caught up with him: a government in need of someone to blame or maybe just take down a notch. Even at that time, I realized that their very unbelief in what he stood for made their success possible.

I told myself: Of course he had escape routes. Of course he had alternate plans. Of course the old man could fashion a thousand ways to escape. Because surely he'd known they were coming—even before they'd put their plans in motion. Whether or not he'd known about the attacks on D.C. and the towers, and whatever his reasons for being unfindable, he must have known, afterward, how his absence from Tower Two would be perceived, and that the outstretched arm of panicked desperation would, of necessity, reach for him.

As we headed across the tundra, I imagined his escape. Lost in the labyrinthine

recesses of the fortress, the soldiers would blunder about. An absolute darkness would embrace them, false heat signatures would fool their night-vision equipment, the passageways would rearrange themselves as they advanced, an electromagnetic pulse frustrate their equipment, his voice thrown behind them leave them foundering against each other as he slipped away. Perhaps he had, like the clever German villain the *Doppelgänger*, a bevy of articulated simulacra moving about the place; the old man would have made use of that technology even as he'd healed the brain of the man who devised it.

Capturing the old man? You might as well capture the wind.

I did as they asked, guiding them closer, indicating the entrance. A hundred yards away, the first vehicle stopped and let out its complement of men, who spread rapidly across the ice under a smudgy gibbous moon.

"By now he's certainly seen us," I said, forgetting my established position that he wasn't here.

"He doesn't kill, right?" Ruxby exhaled into my face. "We're pretty much counting on that. Or do you want to rethink that?" He paused, and did not pull back. "But I'm prepared for that contingency, too."

He had me get out of the vehicle and join him. The men moved quickly, and no sound came back across the blank expanse separating us.

Maybe thirty yards from the entrance: that's how close they got. I didn't see whether a hole opened in the earth, but suddenly, between myself and them, something shot from the ground, silver and fast as a bullet is silver and fast, but the size of a man. The whine of the engine reached us after a moment, and by then I saw, as it struck the earth, hard, angling to my right, someone riding a compact kind of snowmobile. Everyone near the glacier immediately set off in pursuit.

I saw flashes, heard concussions. Guns lit and sent their punctuations across the ice. Ruxby grabbed me, though I hadn't even known I'd jumped forward.

They had trouble getting a bead on the old man—if that's who it was—as he zagged into the distance. And then a whirring from behind me spun me about, and I saw two snowmobiles emerge from our own vehicle. I figured they wouldn't catch the old man, but they made up some distance, and at some point, between their weapons and those of the men on foot, the retreating snowmobile flipped violently over multiple times. A figure staggered upward and began to run; an odd light flared around him.

"That's done it. They've stunned him," said Ruxby through his scarf, binoculars covering the only exposed part of his face. I saw more flurries of movement out there; distance had, conversely, increased their consequence, as if something epic were transpiring, though in the deep past. Now Ruxby let me advance, as he moved too toward the action.

The soldiers reached him, but still the old man had not been seized. I saw men flung away, tossed aside as if they were only the clothing they wore. "Jesus Christ," Ruxby said. Sparks flashed again across the sparkling ground, men swarmed, and at last the activity seemed to cohere into a trembling ball, settling.

All along, men had been communicating via headsets. Only now did a voice of some substance reach me, as someone called back, "He's down! It's done!"

Then the ground jiggled, and from the direction of the old man's hidden fortress came a monstrous sound, like churning rock. I heard Ruxby swear. Lights like birthing stars flared from under the mountain of ice, and then we all lost our footing as a great rush of air sucked us forward. I landed on my elbow. Men shouted. I righted my head to see the entire mountain disappear. I pictured it as from within: the domed firmament collapsing inward, the ice accumulated over geologic swathes of

time filling the space he'd created for himself—labs, armories, a surgery, library. There would be a terrible smell as everything was consumed in an eccentric blast of his own devising. The sound I did not have to imagine. It came to me across the waste: a rumble and a cough, and what had been was simply no more, as if it were the result of an instant's work and could be snuffed out just as fast.

As soon as I could right myself, I checked on the old man, but he hadn't gone anywhere, evidently; the soldiers still knelt in a heap. Two hundred yards away, a black patch discolored the ice.

Ranting, swearing, Ruxby stormed out to where they held the old man, but his words flew away from me. Then they were carrying the old man past, swaddled so he couldn't run or use his fists, and I turned away before he could see my face.

I headed toward my vehicle while they carried him to the other one, and as I touched the handle, my back to those men, I heard someone speaking from just by my right shoulder. "Well done, Lanny," it said, high pitched and airy. No one was there. I felt the tears start as I jerked open the door to the vehicle and threw myself inside. The driver, who'd stayed behind, looked out on what had transpired. He glanced at me, blinked, and didn't offer up a word. Our headlights caught the tiny bits of ice falling from the fuzzy sky. I wanted to be home. Then, when I'd rested, I meant to go in the stores and libraries and burn the books of the old man's adventures, because what happened today had put them all to the torch.

The door by me flew open. "What was in there?" shouted Ruxby. "What did he destroy?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've told you everything."

"Gasses? Do you think we'll need to check for toxins, chemicals? What the hell kind of blast was that?"

"I don't know!" I shouted, screamed really, done with all of this, ruined myself, having brought down ruin.

Ruxby just cast a look toward the black print on the ice. "What a mess," he said. "Here, move over," he directed, and I shifted to the middle. He jerked a thumb toward the other vehicle. "What's your view? Can he get out of there?"

I didn't even consider the question. "Are you sure he's even in there?"

His hand touched the lever on the door. "Hey, lieutenant," he said into his mic. "You sure you've got him?" He glared at me. "He says he's looking at him. Okay, thanks. Nice try," he said to me.

Our vehicle jerked into motion and swung about to follow the other, and the whole way back to the planes I watched the rear of the vehicle ahead as if it might miraculously open and reveal a coterie of armed men staring into a bright and empty space in their very midst.

8

I suppose I should have expected Mairzy. She showed up on the front step on a Saturday morning, the sun behind her so that, at first, I couldn't quite make her out. It had been years, after all. But the coil of the hair was the same, a bit puffy on top, and when the figure before me didn't speak, I followed my instincts and pulled back. I *did* expect her punch.

Holding the door frame, however, I didn't pull back enough, whereas she launched herself forward, following through dead ahead with her small and bony fist, so she caught me directly on the chin. I collapsed backward. My wife called out from the kitchen. I made to turn over, rather than putting up my hands for protection. When

I was half on my side, Mairzy yanked me up by my shirt, and I naturally put my feet under me to get myself standing. Claire shouted from nearby, I started to say something to calm her, and Mairzy pitched me forward so my head slammed into the door frame.

I saw white flashes and pitched over onto an end table, which then came down with me to the floor. Vaguely, I was aware of my wife screaming. Shrieking.

"Back off! Back off!" shouted Mairzy.

I mumbled something to the effect of, "I'm okay," but I stayed where I was, not that my body was giving me much of a choice.

My wife evidently didn't heed Mairzy's advice and joined me on the floor, grasping me across the chest. I kept reassuring her. I figured the worst was past, but she gasped, repeatedly, "Oh god! Oh god!" When she got me onto my knees, I saw that Mairzy had planted herself on the arm of a sofa in the front room.

I had to shut my eyes against the day's brightness. "This is Mairzy," I said. "Of the old man."

Mairzy had me tell the story of what happened. She knew some of it; there'd been a vague wire service story in all the papers about a raid on a polar terrorist hideout.

Rage rimmed her eyes, and it made me defensive. Sentiment left me, and I recalled the reasons I'd cooperated.

"He *was* hiding up there, Mairzy. And why destroy the base? What purpose did that serve? What did he need to conceal?"

"You're an idiot. I never would have thought it of you, but you're an idiot. You've got everything backward. You think these men, this Ruxby, you think these people could be trusted with what the old man knew? You think they would always do what's right? You think they'd be so careful about human life?"

"*Think* about it. Think about his *attempted escape*," she said sardonically. "Do you really think if he'd wanted to get away, he wouldn't have? Why do you think he led them all out onto the ice, away from the base?"

"He . . . led them. . . ?"

"When the blast went off, was anyone inside?" She leaned forward. "No. Right? No." She sat back. "He made sure no one got hurt. He surrendered so everyone would be safe. Everything he did was to protect people. If he hadn't wanted to be caught, they'd never have found him. He knew—he knew you'd tell about the citadel."

"Me?"

"Or someone. Not me, at any rate. He let them think that was the end of it. They'll never come after us now. There's no need. We didn't know anything, and they've captured the old man, who even burned his secrets rather than let them get a glimpse. They'll want to know those secrets. So their focus will shift to interrogation. Imagine what they'll do. People are scared. There aren't any safeguards. There aren't any rules.

"But now," she said, ". . . none of us is safe."

"You just said—"

"I don't mean you and me or any others who worked with the old man. I mean everyone. The people who came to the old man for help. Don't you get that? Who's looking out for people now? Where will we turn?"

Something in her words . . . Claire heard it too, and gave me a look. The woman sounded unstable; her thinking wasn't clear. When I looked back, her hand was coming from the breast pocket of her shirt. Her fingers went to her mouth.

"What's the world without him?" she said, then shut her lips firmly. As I bolted to my feet, her head snapped back and her body arched violently. The years had slowed me some, but even in my youth, my glory days, the days I ran with giants, I wouldn't have been fast enough.

Claire watched when Ruxby's people took away the body, but I couldn't. I had expected Mairzy's anger. I hadn't expected her despair, and until the door shut I didn't realize that I shared it. Mairzy had taken the pill, but it was as if she'd meant it for me.

And she'd been right, in part. In the days that followed, everything seemed different: blanker, harder, and harder to bear. Though I hadn't interacted with him in years before this misadventure, a belief in the old man and his secret labors had sustained me to an extent I had not appreciated. Now I felt it.

The old man had a pledge he'd composed for himself. I read it once; framed behind his desk and printed freehand on a small, yellowed piece of paper, it was labeled merely "My Oath." My companions were talking, of all things, about the World Series. I don't recall the oath exactly. There was something about helping anyone who sought his aid; a bit about applying every faculty he had toward humanitarian goals—and strengthening those faculties to their limits. The last lines had to do with the necessity for peace and a caution against undue violence.

Never in my years with the old man did any of us recite this oath or take a pledge of loyalty. We signed no agreement and were given no contract. It was understood, I suppose, that we would simply follow his lead—because he had judged that, despite our plentiful weaknesses, we would, in our best moments, do what was right, or at least learn to do better.

I was a retired, married man when I formulated these thoughts, standing one frigid night on the lawn behind my house. But I was not dead, and I was not deaf to the voices of people seeking solace.

Only, I did not know what to do.

And I came to see what Mairzy meant: The old man's logic—the mathematics of his moral reasoning—was not my logic. He calculated the human cost in making the government continue the hunt. Like me, he must have taken into account the lives of his former assistants. The most reasonable gesture, seemingly, would have been surrender.

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Yet neither was that what he'd done. He'd fought those men as if he were merely one of them, one of us, letting them play their part as successful captors, triumphant agents of the law who could tout their battle in the next day's newspapers. Popular imagination needed to see a great battle being won in dramatic blows. The old man saw only "the Work," a labor of days and lives, an abstraction constructed from unrelated events, in which every human act has value, even if, at the time, its worth cannot be gauged.

Spring, three years later. I stood pondering the perennials along the front of the house when a delivery truck pulled up. A young man in the standard brown uniform hopped down, swinging his arms in a determined stride, a clipboard in one hand.

"Mr. Lanagan?"

"Yes?"

He indicated the truck. "I've got a delivery of encyclopedias for you."

I blinked. "People still order those?"

"Um. You did."

"Well, actually, I didn't. Can I see that?" He handed me the clipboard with its list of deliveries attached. "That's not—" I started, then shut my mouth. I'd been about to comment on it getting my name wrong. Instead of "Brian" . . . it said "Lanny." I looked at the truck as if it contained explosives enough to lift the neighborhood into the sky.

"What do you think?" asked the delivery man.

I checked his face for any signs of deceit. He wore an open look. It was a bright, warming day, and he seemed a part of it. Perhaps he was who he appeared to be, and perhaps not—either way, I felt, it was all right, and I let my scrutiny slide away.

"Sure," I said, handing back the clipboard. "Bring them in."

A box the size of a washing machine teetered against the straps on his handtruck as he wheeled it up the slate walk, then turned and bumped it up the two steps into the house. I directed him to leave the box in the middle of the living room. Following the arrows on the box exterior, he lowered one long side to the floor.

I held out a twenty.

"We don't get tips," he said.

"I don't usually get deliveries. Humor me." He took the bill, touched his cap in a quaint gesture, and left, shutting the door softly. I watched through the picture window as the truck drove off, unremarkable and remarkable both.

Naturally, the return address was a watery blur. With the letter opener from my wife's desk by the stairs, I slit the tape. I found myself looking down at the top of a small bookcase. I wedged the letter opener into where the cardboard edges met, jammed in my fingers, and tore the thing open. There stood a case of unmarked volumes. I got down on one knee and pulled out one of the perhaps two dozen fat brown books.

I opened randomly to a handwritten page and read the date: "February 7, 1968." I read the words—rather, I sounded them out. Except for the dates and names, everything was recorded in phonetic Tergen. I set the open book on the floor and sounded it out in my head, hearing the whistles of birds, the movement of air in trees, the sound rocks make when they shatter. I drew out a later volume, which ended too early, and then another. I scanned the pages until my own name appeared. I sat back, the bookcase the only thing I saw.

He'd left me few permanent signs of his existence: my unreliable memories; the wedding gift, mounted on my mantel, etched with one vital word; and these journals ended with the tales of the elect. And yet the world seemed, suddenly, in what was seen and unseen, too full. ○

—for my father

William Preston

MARBLE PEOPLE

If marble people were the world, some of us would strike others with great force so we could inhabit a circle of power, until we were caromed away in turn by the force of another.

Others would stand tall and straight, far above the antics of such childlike games. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, upright and unyielding, they would carry the weight of the ages with style and stoic indifference.

Yet the rare ones would be those who endured the brutal assault of hammer and chisel to emerge transformed, revealing the inherent grace that lies hidden in the branching veins of earthbound stone.

—Bruce Boston



CENTAURS

Benjamin Crowell

Making ones way through the teen years unscathed is a nearly impossible task for those of us on Earth. Surviving the perils of the heart and the passage to adulthood will be even harder for those who go exploring the treacherous hazards of the Neptune trojans.

Easy: obviously you don't wear a skirt for a date where you'll have to use a pressure suit. Hard: exactly how much did Ginny like Serge? A lot, yeah, but—she felt her cheeks get warm, and realized she'd probably been brushing her teeth for fifteen minutes straight while replaying the same ratty fantasy.

Oh, god, some people would say this was really a first date. Ginny turned on the hair dryer to make it sound like she was doing something. But it didn't feel like a first date. So what if they'd never met in person? She felt like she knew Serge better than she'd ever known a friend. Better than any boy, for sure. Way better than Juan, and she'd gone pretty far with him—would have gone further if his stupid sister hadn't come home at the wrong time. She wished she lived on Earth, where you could get some privacy. She'd carefully never mentioned to Serge that she'd had her tubes valved, so that would obviously be an easy excuse to say no. It would all be easy, if she could just figure out whether "no" was the word she wanted to say.

By the time she was done with the checklist for her suit, she'd stopped worrying and was whistling the bluesy instrumental chorus to her new tune. It was a good line, simple in a way that would never give anyone a clue how much sweat it had cost her—and it was singable, like the best instrumental lines always had to be. Maybe she should let Serge put lyrics to it after all.

She realized that her father was hovering in the door to her room, his prosthetic arm folded over his real one.

"I like that one," he said. "What did you end up calling it?"

"Makes You Wonder."

"Oh, I remember." He ya-da-da'd the first couple of bars of the A section, and she laughed. Daddy was probably the only man in the Neptune Trojans who could wander off key singing three notes that were supposed to be the same pitch. He joined her, laughing at himself. "It's an old mining camp you're checking out?" he asked.

"Yeah." She laid out her suit's carrying bag on her bed and zipped the suit inside.

"And this boy Serge," he asked, "he's vacuum qualified?"

"Of course. They make you do it in school." She was pretty sure that Serge had done the qual as an independent study, but there was no need to steer the conversation in that direction. Her parents seemed to have assumed that she'd already met Serge in person, and she hadn't corrected them.

"Never know these days. Anyway, the time comes, all the drills in the world might not mean anything. What kind of suit does he wear?"

"Uh, Berg and Huang, I think." She didn't actually know. She put her own suit bag over her arm and acted ready to leave.

"Lot of people swear by a B and H," he said. "I don't like the helmet, though, bad case of alligator head. Filed your flight plan?"

"Yep. I'll be back by midnight."

"Okay. Don't rush to get back on time, just call and let us know if you can't make it. Rushing—"

"—is the best way to get killed, I know." She must be the only girl in the world whose parents would worry so much about such a short flight. The whole thing was less than a light-second, and she wouldn't even be solo for most of it.

"All right, then." He handed over the keys to the runabout and gave her an awkward hug around the suit bag. "Have fun."

"Thanks, Daddy."

Ginny laid in her precomputed course and started bringing the cabin down from habitat pressure to 30k. Centaurus looked so bright and close from the pilot's couch that she felt an urge to lick a finger and wipe it off of the cockpit plastic. How could anyone have ever seen the shape of a horse-man in that jumble of stars?

The quarter-gee of thrust was just enough to settle her stomach, and she ate two breakfast bars and drank a bulb of tea. She decided that her dithering in the bathroom had been all about low blood sugar. Completely silly. She was just looking forward to meeting Serge in person, and checking out the old mine site. If he'd had another reason for suggesting a flight to a secluded spot, well, that could be okay too. Her cousin Maypalig knew him, and last year Ginny had managed to twiggle enough information out of Maypalig, without seeming *too* interested, to be pretty sure Serge was someone you could trust. Anyway, Ginny knew him better by now than Maypalig did.

The transfer orbit brought her in with her vector slanty instead of ass backward, so she got a nice naked-eye view of the Blum family's habitat from its day side. It was the kind of independent mine (ice and methane) that Daddy always talked about going back to—a four hundred meter rock with the habitat spinning inside a big ice-reinforced cavity. All Ginny could see was the surface, which was littered with equipment.

There was Serge, with a big orange signal ball. She brought herself in on manual with the gas jets, nice and easy. Not bad for a townie girl, hardly even kicked up any dust. (She'd hated Juan's slapdash landings.) She drove in the landing pitons and winked a go-ahead with the hull lights. The ball blacked out, and Serge launched himself casually into a flat fifty-meter arc with just enough spin to bring his feet forward. Clank, nailed the landing on her hull—he obviously spent a lot of time doing surface work. Daddy would approve. He probably wouldn't have minded at all if she'd mentioned that she'd never met Serge in person.

She checked her face on her phone. The airlock finished cycling, and Serge's voice came over the intercom from his helmet radio. "Hey, tone-deaf."

"What's up, word butcher?" It was funny to hear him answer right away, without any lightspeed delay at all. She leaned down to look through the cockpit's hatch. Useless: everyone looks the same in a suit. She already knew what his face looked like.

He waved a gauntleted hand. "How about we get under thrust," he said through the intercom, "and then I'll unpeel?"

"Sounds good."

It still felt strange to talk to him in real time. Bolivar Condominium and the Blum family hab were as close together this month as their orbits would ever bring them, close enough that Serge and Ginny could afford the fuel for a visit—if she was careful to nav it like a little old lady going to church.

The cockpit GUI showed that Serge was strapped in to the passenger couch. She lift-

ed off, fired up the nukes, and got under way. As her attitude lined up, Centaurus swept back into view. Contradictory images of centaurs popped into her mind from that boring semester of Ancient Earth Cultures: wise teachers, then a statue of a savage one carrying a struggling nymph slung over his horse-back. Foosh! Her forebrain might be old-lady-to-church, but her hindbrain was obviously on a different track. She checked to make sure her ears weren't too red before hitting the comm. "All clear," she announced.

She left him some time for privacy in case he had plumbing to arrange while he shucked his suit. Finally she heard his steps coming up the companionway. She took a deep breath and leaned over.

"Hi." His head popped through the hatch.

"Hi. You can come on in, there's room. The nav board's locked down."

"Okay." He did a slow-motion pull-up and swung into the cramped cockpit. He looked the same as on the phone, but . . . younger.

"At last I meet my nemesis," Serge said.

"Do I look like you expected?" she asked, forcing a smile to cover her surprise. "I sharpened my fangs just for you."

"Better than I expected. That wart cream must really work." She could see him looking-but-not-looking at her, the way boys did.

"So, uh, I guess I never asked, but how old are you, Serge?"

"Fifteen. You?"

How could she not know that? But of course only a total frutser would do that on the first pingback: *How old are you, and what school do you go to?* It was the kind of thing her *parents* probably said the first time. She realized that she hadn't answered his question.

"Turned seventeen in April." She saw that he was blushing. "Sorry, it's not like it really matters. I mean, I was just surprised. Most of the kids in BritLit are older, that's all."

"I'll be sixteen in a couple of months. They placed me in freshman comp," he said, pretending to look at the nav board, "but I threatened to throttle this guy if he dangled another participle, so they kicked me upstairs."

"So are you going to graduate early or something?"

"No, I have a dysfunctional relationship with Euclid. Proofs—" He turned back to her and made a face. "You want to do ag management, right?"

God, had they really sunk into talking about what they wanted to major in? "Probably," she said, "but I try not to worry about it too much. Life ends up happening to you anyway, you know?" Maybe she was trying too hard to sound sophisticated. Fifteen . . . wow. Why hadn't Maypalig told her? Probably because Ginny had been so careful to act like she didn't care.

Serge had found the rock in a database of old mining claims, but the records were short on details: nothing but orbit, mass, and diameter. She put the runabout in a slow orange-peel trajectory around it and did an eyeball scan while lying on her back in the pilot's couch. The landscape appeared to twist and revolve. Typical crunchy frostball, dirt sprinkles on top.

"Hey, Serge?" she said over the intercom. "I'm not seeing much, but I don't know what I'm even looking for. You want to come up and take a look? You're the miner."

"Okay."

The centrifugal force was just enough so you could hear his hands and feet on the rungs of the latter. He popped into the cabin.

"You want the couch?" she asked. "I can—"

"No, it's all right." He crammed himself onto the tiny deck, slouching with his fingers hooked behind his knees and his head tilted back.

Discreetly, she looked him over. He was actually . . . kind of cute. Fifteen, though.

What would people say? She caught a whiff of him, that suit smell that boys got, but it wasn't strong. Nice, really. His belly muscles were just a little bit taut through his white cotton shirt. Oh, god. This was nuts. Totally inappropriate. They were artistic colleagues, and that was all it was going to be. Ever. She was operating on a whole different emotional level from a fifteen-year-old. And people would say—

"See that white circle?" he asked.

"No."

"Over on the right-hand edge of that crater."

"Oh, yeah."

"I think that was probably their radio dish."

"All right, let's try it."

Outside the runabout, they took a look around by sunlight. Serge had tried to pick a fresh place to land where they wouldn't disturb any old stuff, but the spot he chose turned out to be almost on top of a vertical mine shaft. A brown cloud of dirty methane vapor whipped away into space from the ground around the still-glowing jets. This was the first time she'd landed on a surface that nobody else had landed on, one that still had volatiles left. She knew from Daddy's stories that the brown stuff would stink up the cabin like crazy if it got on their suits. A pool of something was seeping up around one of the pitons. Nitrogen? Serge would probably know.

They maneuvered over to the dish, Serge using feet and hands and Ginny her hip jets. Next to the dish was a quonset hut, covered with a thin layer of regolith.

"You think they did that with shovels?" she asked, amazed.

"Looks like it." Serge's voice came over the radio. "What is that, twenty centimeters of shielding? They must not have cared much about their tender chromosomes."

"Maybe they didn't expect to stay in it for very long."

"Maybe," he said. "So what do you want to do, captain?"

Captain. Well, she *was* the one who was seventeen. "We could poke around in the hut, but . . ."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," she said. It seemed creepy.

"If you don't want to. . ."

"I don't really want to," she admitted. She was glad he'd said it first.

"So . . ."

"You want to go down the shaft?" she asked.

"I guess we could. We saw the bottom, it's not that deep."

"Maybe it's stupid," she said, like she just didn't care very much. He was the one with all the surface hours. It would be better if he said it was okay.

"Should be all right," he said. "This gravity, you can't hurt yourself by falling. No sun or impacts inside, so it shouldn't be any different than the day they dug it."

They went back and stood by the runabout at the lip of the shaft.

"I should probably go first," he said.

"I'll go."

"How many hours have you got?" he asked.

"Almost got my Level III." Depending on what you meant by almost.

"Rock, paper, scissors?"

"Okay."

Ginny's paper covered Serge's rock. Boys never chose paper.

She jet-hopped cautiously to the lip of the shaft. Her jets planted her hard enough in a patch of crust to make methane sizzle out from the warmth of her soles. For the fourth time since leaving the runabout, she checked that her helmet light was on. A muscle in her belly twitched. She wished she'd picked scissors.

"Okay," she said, "how about if you just give me a tap? I'm afraid if I try to hop in, I'll overdo it and clear the hole."

"All right. Ready?"

"Go ahead." She never felt the tap, but she saw the edge of the blackened pit glide slowly under her, and then she was starting to sink. "Geronimo!" she yelled. She checked her helmet clock.

Pretty soon she was bored with the process of falling. After a minute, the lip of the shaft was up around her waist. Gradually she picked up speed. Another thirty seconds and it was above her head. She wanted to use her hip jets to speed up the process, but decided that would be foolhardy. She'd probably end up bouncing off the walls. Now she was moving fast enough that she could detect the upward creep of the walls from one second to the next: striations of ice and rock.

Serge's voice came over the radio: "I'm shining my helmet light straight down. Can you see the bottom better now?"

"I dunno, let me check." She folded herself into a diver's pike to take a peek down past her legs. She had to fight against the inflated suit, and it was hard work. She remembered Serge's pose in the cockpit and felt herself flush. "Not really. I can't get the right angle to look." She relaxed her body again.

"How fast do you think you're falling now?" he asked.

"Mmm . . . maybe a centimeter a second. Hang on, gonna hit the far wall." She reached out at waist level and pushed gently with her index finger for a fraction of a second to fend herself off from the wall.

Another minute passed, and then she felt a gentle push on her heels, and she was flipping onto her back in slow motion.

"Okay, I'm at the bottom."

"Foosh! Were you scared?"

"Not really," she said.

"What does it look like?"

"It's totally white down here at the bottom."

"Must be a nice vein of ice."

His helmet light looked very far away. "Will you wiggle your head a little, so I can see your light move?"

He did. "Thanks," she said. It was reassuring to know he was up there. "Can you see mine?"

"Yep. Looks kind of hazy, though. Do you have something smeared on the lens?"

She checked that the palms of her gloves were clean, then took a swipe at it. "Any better?" she asked.

"Hm . . . not really."

"I think I know what you mean," she said. "I'm seeing the same thing." It was as if she were looking through cotton.

A drop of liquid landed on her faceplate, freezing in a spatter.

"What the hell?" she said. "I got a drop of something on my faceplate."

"Are you sure? That's not good."

"Sure I'm sure. Don't shank with me. What do you mean by not good?" Another drop.

"Sorry. I'm not shanking with you. When it hits your faceplate, does it freeze, stay liquid, or fizzle off?"

"Freeze." Shit, what did that mean? That had been on the Level II test, but now her brain wasn't working.

"Okay, stay calm. That's water. Everything's going to be okay."

"You mean *is* okay, or *is going to be*? How can there be liquid water flying around?"

"You saw everything boiling off around the runabout. There's outgassing going into the shaft. Cracks in the bedrock or something."

"And?"

"Well, it means the shaft might not be as stable as we thought. So just take a deep breath, let it out, and give yourself a kick—" She kicked off like a jackrabbit. "—just a gentle one. You don't want to do a whizzy."

She hit the side of the shaft and went spinning head over heels. "Oh, god—" She flailed, and her breakfast came back up. "—whiz."

"Don't panic. You're headed up and out, so it's okay."

She had to stop the spinning. She waved her hands around, felt one hand slip over something, and then got a grip on a rock with the other. Her body swung around and slammed into the wall of the shaft, and she was barely able to keep her grip on the rock as she rebounded.

"Ginny? Tell me what's happening."

Couldn't he see? "I'm stopped. I'm grabbing on to a rock." Her vomit was freezing to the inside of her faceplate, and she was huffing and fogging up the plastic with her breath.

"Okay, that's fine. Deep breath, let it out, and count one."

She breathed in and out. "One."

"Good. Again."

In and out. "Two."

"Good, but slower. Give me up to five."

She gave a voice command to ramp up the defrost and then complied. "Three . . . four . . . five."

"All right. What do you see around you?"

She realized that she'd had her eyes closed. She opened them, but the defrost was only starting to work. "Hang on a sec, I'm waiting for the defrost to catch up." She felt sheepish for panicking. It was really no big deal.

The plastic cleared. "I see lots of water drops in the air—in the vacuum," she said. They were pretty, she realized, like stars.

"Okay, ready to start up again?"

"All right."

She tried, but her hand wouldn't come unstuck from the rock. "My hand is stuck!"

"Stay calm—"

"It's stuck, I can't get it off!"

"Don't do anything, just wait—"

"It's stuck! The ice, it's frozen on!" She pulled so hard that her hand came up into the sleeve, and then she was free and whizzing again. "I got it, oh, god!" More vomit came up.

"You've got a pressure drop, Ginny."

She bounced off of a wall, bounced again.

"Ginny, can you hear me? I'm showing a pressure drop in your suit."

"Where?" As she said it, she realized it was a stupid thing to ask. She checked her own pressure gauge. Oh shit, oh shit! Her ears felt like someone was driving icepicks into them.

"I can't tell where. Okay, it's not dropping too fast, so stay calm. I'm coming down. Stay where you are. Try and find where the leak is."

Serge's helmet light disappeared from above, and she was still spinning, the blood pooling in her head. Which way was up now? Forget that, find the leak. Her hand was cold. She looked at her glove, and in the light from her helmet she saw her own skin through a millimeter-wide hole in the fingertip. She must have torn her glove when she pulled it loose from the ice. She slapped the hand under her armpit and squeezed hard. She checked her pressure gauge, and it seemed to be holding steady now.

"Your pressure stopped dropping," said Serge's voice.

"I found the leak. It's in my glove, and I have it stuck under my armpit."

"Good. Stay the way you are. Don't try to use your patch kit."

Then he was bumping into her and scooping her up in his arms. She heard the sound of someone crying and wondered if it was coming from her.

"Oh, god, you must think I'm such an idiot," she said. She was sitting in the passenger couch, sucking on a bulb of tea. The cabin was warm, and they were under thrust on the way home.

"Not at all. You did what you had to."

"I just kept making things worse." If anyone heard how stupid—

"You're alive. I like you alive." He really did have a cute smile.

"You want to come over and sit with me?" she asked.

Two in an acceleration couch would normally be one too many, but they made it fit. They had a two-hour flight back to the Blum rock, and she wouldn't mind spending it just like this. She felt safe and happy. She was surprised by how tired she felt. She definitely needed to start hitting the vacuum training harder. Some of the boring things the teachers said seemed a lot more real now: *You might not get a second chance. Don't try to do things beyond your level of experience.* She was lucky to have had Serge with her.

A long time went by, and maybe she fell asleep for a while. She opened her eyes and looked at Serge's face, his nose a centimeter from hers. She could feel his heart beating fast. She could tell he wanted her, and a hot feeling started to spread out from a spot just behind her belly button. She kissed him. He was a little clumsy at first. Hadn't he ever kissed a girl? Her hand went under his shirt, his hand on her thigh.

They kissed for a long time, and then her mind flitted back to the bathroom that morning. She'd set up an excuse to say no. Now she wanted to say yes. Yes! But what would he think? It sort of *was* like their first date, even if it wasn't. She pulled her mouth back from his and looked into his eyes. His hand stroked her hip. It was hard to give herself permission to say it. And then she realized that she had an easy excuse to say what she wanted to say.

"Serge, you saved my life. You can . . . if you want . . ."

He pulled his head back. "So that's what this is? A thank-you shank?"

"No, that's not the way I meant it."

He looked away, but she could see a tear in the corner of his eye. She reached out to wipe it off, but he batted her hand away. She wanted to explain, to tell him what she'd thought in the bathroom, how she'd felt when he was on the deck of the cockpit. But it was hard to figure out how to say those things, and before she could say them Serge was hauling himself out of the couch and climbing up the ladder to the cockpit.

After the midflight flip on the long leg home, she found Centaurus staring in at her again through the cockpit window. Stern, definitely the wise teacher version now. Yeah, all right, too bad you weren't there in the mineshaft, buddy. She decided that even if screwing up was no fun, it was better than having someone who'd always tell you the right thing to do.

A ping came in. Mom. Navving solo was a good excuse for leaving the comm set to text only.

Hi, sweetie, good trip?

She pictured the scene, the two of them sitting on their bed a hundred thousand clicks away. Daddy: Don't joggle her elbow, she's a big girl now. Mom: Just touching bases. Daddy, *hmpf*, unstrapping his arm and pretending he's not worried, won't lie awake in bed with the lights out.

Ginny's suit was in its bag already. She'd have it slung over her arm casually when she got home. ○

CRAZY MAN

Like fallen leaf
torn from book
the time traveler—a gnarl-fisted
lanky Glasgow shipbuilder
hoping to enter Edinburgh's Royal Society
on the strength of his travels—
flutters into existence on the oil-cloth seat
of my study's old chair of dark-stained oak,
its cracked frame creaking
beneath his nineteenth century weight;
and he cries out in joy at my strangeness—
for I walk in resplendent in staid Pendleton wool
and blue jeans
on this damp and chill Wisconsin morning.
I exclaim in startled reply
at his animated shadow appearing
against lozenge-shaped casement windows
giving view of drizzly ground and neighbor homes.
He fires out a stream of incomprehensible gibberish.
"Crazy man!" I say,
heading back to the kitchen
to see that we have enough oat breakfast
to set before our unexpected guest.

Nights now we spend sitting
over mist-touched whisky
lulled by the ancient melody
of idle conversation
touching on his forward-tossing contraption
that must have rusted to uselessness
there beside the River Clyde.
Together we savor his memories of stone buildings
and cobblestone streets solid with the wealth
of the tobacco trade—memories shared between us
in his halting American and my awkward Glaswegian—
and we end each night with a cry of sorrow
that a time machine cannot turn back,
only forward. "Crazy man!" I say each night
while falling asleep, awash with wonder
yet again that this man with all his brilliance
ever could have left his lovely
sea-washed isle of time
for ours.

—Mark Rich

BLIND CAT DANCE

Alexander Jablovkov

Alexander Jablovkov tells us that, “in the last decade of the last century I was quite productive, with five novels and a number of short stories (most of them in *Asimov’s*). Family and career took a toll, and I have not been visible in the past few years. But, after much struggle, I seem to have figured out how to run a full-time job and a life, while getting my writing done too.” The author’s new novel, *Brain Thief*, was recently published by Tor Books and he is currently shopping another novel around, while writing stories again as well. After you read his multifaceted new tale about a future in which very few of Earth’s inhabitants seem to have a clear view of what is really going on, you can visit his website www.jablokov.com.

*E*ncounter #1 *Cafe Kulfi*

The cougar stalks into the cafe, its skin loose, looking relaxed, even a bit bored. Its padded feet are silent on the terrazzo. Conversation at the tables drops for a moment, but then, when the cat doesn’t immediately kill anything, gets noisy again.

Berenika sits near the back, on a banquette, with her friends from before, Mria and Paolo. Mria is small and nervous, with spiky frosted hair. Paolo is tall, with big ears and Adam’s apple.

“You don’t mean you, like, just left.” Mria can’t believe it. “Walked out on Mark.”

“You can’t just walk out of that place, can you?” Paolo says. “That’s miles of desert. You could die. You must have gotten a ride. Who gave you a ride?”

“Oh, sure,” Mria says. “That’s what we need to know. Her means of transportation.”

Paolo looks hurt. “I was just saying she could have called me to come get her. I would have done it. Right, Berenika? Far, but I would have done it for you.”

Berenika is solemn. “Thank you, Paolo.”

“But who—”

“Oh!” Mria turns her head sharply toward Berenika, hoping her hair will exclude Paolo from the conversation. “But what did Mark do? What did he say?”

“Not much, really,” Berenika says. “By that point, I think he realized there wasn’t anything he could do.”

“You must know your husband better than that,” Mria says. “There’s always something he can do. Has he called you? Hired people to kidnap you? Planted himself in your yard and let birds nest in his hair?”

"No." Berenika clearly doesn't want to talk about it. "Nothing like that."

"We were all going to Easter Island." Paolo is mournful. "To that new jungle. I was already packed."

"Ah," Mria says. "Procrastination pays off again. I hadn't even found my suitcase yet."

"That's actually not funny." Paolo blinks slowly. "I was looking forward to it."

"Oh, so was I." Mria waggles her cup over her shoulder at me without looking, an annoying habit. "So was I. I need a break. Easter Island. Giant heads, buried under vines. And you, Berenika. It was your idea in the first place. You wanted some special tour to see how they brought everything back. More than back. I don't think the jungle was as dense before people came there."

Berenika isn't paying much attention to the discussion about the ecological restoration of Easter Island, which, with variations, they've already had several times. She's watching the cougar. No one else is, because it doesn't really seem to be doing anything.

It's a male cougar, *Puma concolor*, medium-sized for its species at 130 pounds, six feet long. It is utterly still, not even the tip of its long, luxurious tail moving. Its fur is red-brown, paler under its muzzle and on its belly. That color matches that of the local population of deer. There are no deer in the cafe. Its hazel eyes are dilated in the dimness. It can't see color, but can detect the smallest movement.

It has sensed the shadow of something. It is on full alert. And well it should be. It's out of its territorial range, and on the edge of the range of another male. A bigger male.

It doesn't really know that yet. Right now, it's just checking things out.

I refill Mria's cup, but she just sighs at the delay, not noticing me.

"Weren't you looking forward to it?" Mria's voice gets penetrating. "Berenika!"

"What?" Berenika looks at her friends. "Sure. Of course I was."

"That would have been a great place for you to learn about . . . restoration methods, whatever it was." Paolo sighs. "I bought this nice linen jacket. . . ."

"Return it." Mria turns to cut him out again. "You're not seriously still interested in working, like, with animals, Berenika. Are you?"

"I am." Berenika smiles, just for a split second, a flash of light. "I'm sure they wouldn't let me start with animals, but that's still what I want."

"Oh! That's ridiculous. Just leave them alone, why don't you? Let them be themselves. Natural, like they're supposed to be."

They all look at the cougar, which is again on the move.

It doesn't see anything at the tables it moves past. It believes the cafe to be empty, in fact sees the space as a clearing in a larger forest.

"Okay," Mria says. "Maybe that's not so natural. I didn't even really notice when these things started wandering around. Where does the thing take a crap? Not in here, I hope." She picks up her feet so her pumps don't touch the floor.

"It's trained to go in a certain spot, where it gets recycled," Berenika says. "You might not have noticed it, but there's a place under the bushes in front of the candle store. And it looked like there was another cougar that usually used it."

And then she sniffs.

"The service here sucks," Mria says. "But the place seems clean enough." She keeps her feet up, though, just in case.

"You checked in the cat toilet?" Paolo says. "And you could tell who'd used it?"

But now Berenika is up. She stalks around, tall and loose, a bit of a cat herself. The combs in her thick, black hair glint in the dimness. The cougar jerks its head, and she freezes. It looks past her. Somewhere, inside, it is deeply frustrated, knowing it's missing something but having no way of figuring out what it is.

She kneels and sniffs a corner by the counter. Mark had led me to expect someone

a bit more . . . romantic. Not interested in the yucky details of how we actually get these animals to survive among us. She hitches her skirt up a bit to free up her movements and sniffs again. She's dressed beautifully, with several layers of translucent fabric of contrasting patterns.

People in the café are now watching her, not the cougar.

Paolo shreds his napkin in embarrassment, then closes his eyes.

It wouldn't be natural for me not to react.

"Have you lost something, miss?"

She stands up next to me. "We're in another cougar's territory here. Where is it now?"

I'm startled. Did she actually examine the feces in the waste recycler in the plaza?

"I've seen one, I guess. Another cat, right? But I don't know. I could ask . . ."

"That's all right." She heads back to her table, having dismissed me as useless.

That's the point. That's why I'm wearing this stupid padded white jacket, like a fencer, or something. I'm supposed to be taking care of things in the background.

I still wish she'd have really looked at me.

"Their urine has been modified to smell kind of like turpentine." Berenika slides neatly back into her seat. "To us. To each other, it still smells jagged and aggressive."

"That's charming," Paolo says.

"It's a lot of work to get it just right," Berenika says. "Real skill." If only she knew. "But we're definitely on an established territory. I bet that other cougar is out past all those little stands in the plaza. There must be good hunting for small game in the shrubs."

She's absolutely right. That other cougar, larger and stronger than this one, isn't part of the story yet, but there is the potential for drama. Fights over territory and access to sex always sell.

"If you like stuff like that, Mark could have set you up better than anyone," Mria says. "I think he has connections with the guys who run this stuff. You could have your own, I don't know, ecosystem, whatever."

"It's a messy hobby," Paolo says. "Not like you, Berenika. I didn't even think Mark should have gotten those blind fish in your basement. What a lot of work! Is that what got you interested?"

"I didn't want Mark to set me up with anything."

Her friends can tell they've annoyed Berenika. That's something they don't want to do.

Mria shifts in her seat. "Let me get this. My turn, really."

"Good point," Paolo says.

The cougar slides behind the counter, being a bit perverse now, as they will be. It angles its body up and puts its forepaws up on the counter, knocking some demitasses to the floor. Its claws are a good inch and a half long. It yawns in *flehmen*, seeking scent information, and, incidentally, shows its canines, white against its black gumline.

Well, it gets what information it can, but cannot overcome the blockages that allow it to survive in the environment it now lives in. It has no idea it's in a place that serves good Turkish coffee, black as night, sweet as love, hot as hell, a place that makes you wear a ridiculous jacket to serve it. It can't smell anything human. It can't see us or hear us. As far as it is concerned, we no longer exist.

It reaches its head forward . . . and pushes its nose against the hot side of the espresso machine.

It makes a tiny yelp, like a kitten, then jumps back, crouches down and hisses.

Everyone in the café laughs. Despite the fact that they are invisible to it, that there is no possible threat, they are still afraid of it, and welcome such evidence of its impotence.

Berenika, I notice, doesn't laugh.

Encounter #2

No Faux Pho

A red-tailed hawk soars overhead in an updraft from the parking lot. It's been up there a while without success. The deer mice in the high grass between the parking places haven't been active.

The noodle shop is stuck to the side of the old mall like a piece of gum. The tables are on balconies hanging down, with steep stairs that make it easy to spill pho on a customer. Not that anyone worries about the comfort of the waitstaff.

Mria and Berenika have chosen the lowest table, just above where a small herd of elk browse beneath oaks and maples with leaves just touched with russet and purple by approaching fall. An elk cow lowers her head, grabs a bit of grass, looks around. She can't see us, or the mall, or the cars that make their way over hardened paths through the lot's ridges and swales to find spots outside the wildlife zones. She also can't see the cougar, who sits, seemingly not paying attention to her, in some underbrush a few feet away.

That's two completely different ways of not seeing. I'm sure there are others.

"You know," Mria says. "I was just remembering how you and Mark got together."

"It was fated," Berenika says. "The stars were aligned and it all happened exactly as was ordained."

"What?"

Berenika laughs. "Oh, come on, Mria. We met at that party. Chance. You had just left. I was helping Margaret clean up."

"Duty pays off again."

"He always said he was 'putting in an appearance,'" Berenika says. "I thought that was pompous, then learned how much of that he actually does."

"He put in an appearance on Easter Island," Mria says. "Don't tell Paolo. He'll never get over it. Poor Paolo. He kind of got to thinking that he was the one Mark really liked. That they had some kind of *relationship*."

"Mark does like Paolo. He said so."

"Oh! Mark. Like you can believe what he says."

"You look good," Berenika says. "Is that a new thing with your hair?"

"Just growing it out a little." Mria pats her blond curls with a satisfied air. "I've got somebody good. I'll give you her name."

"Sure. Maybe."

Berenika's black hair is thicker and shorter than it was a few months ago, and the clips in it look almost permanent. And she wears an outdoor jacket with a couple of bird shit stains on it that never quite came out.

A second hawk sits on a bough of an oak, just as unsuccessful as the one circling above the parking lot, but not working as hard.

"Really, Berenika. Are you still doing the animal thing?"

Berenika smiles. "I should have done it years ago. Even at a low level, I love it. I have to start at the bottom, of course. Physiology classes, ecology, working support in a clinic. It's physically hard. I never expected how hard. I fall dead asleep in my bed every night."

"That desert house of Mark's had the best beds," Mria says. "I never dreamed there."

"Try cleaning up after a sick moose all day. You won't dream then."

"No thanks. I prefer a really expensive mattress."

"Maybe you should have married Mark," Berenika says.

"Yeah, well, I didn't stay to help do the dishes. That'll show me. But he never wanted anyone but you. Why is that?"

"I'm the wrong person to explain. I have no idea." Berenika watches the cougar. It

stalks forward, belly to the ground, astonishingly fluid for something that must have bones in it somewhere.

Mria follows Berenika's gaze, but I can tell she doesn't see the cougar either.

"This banh mhi is too dry," Mria says. "Now, that's not really a complaint, but you really like that moistness, if you know what I'm saying. . . ."

I replace her banh mhi.

"How is your food, Berenika?" Mria says.

Berenika hasn't eaten anything. "Fine, I guess."

"Yeah. Kind of, meh, right? I don't like the way this one soaks the bread, kind of makes it fall apart. . . ."

She's not watching as the cougar charges, but Berenika is.

Three or four bounds, and it is on the elk.

But something gives the cow warning: a rustle in the leaves, a finch that switches branches a few seconds before the cat makes its decision, something, but it is already moving when the cougar tries to drop it.

Claws scratch its flank, but it is bounding off across the parking lot, dodging between the cars it sees as trees, and is gone. Cougars aim, not at the weak or the sick, but at the inattentive. When they've judged attention wrong, they can find themselves struggling with something fully as strong as they are.

There is no way the cougar can pursue the fleeing elk. Like all cats, its speed is available only in short bursts. Its heart is small for its body mass. Just that effort alone has sucked up all its stored oxygen. It stands on the spot where the elk had been, breathing deeply, replenishing its stores. At moments like this, it is completely vulnerable.

"What happened?" Mria cranes around.

"Nothing," Berenika says. "Nothing happened."

"He can't have let you go so easily," Mria says. "That's just not the Mark I know."

"Maybe the Mark you know isn't the Mark I know. I don't want to talk about it."

"All right." Mria manages a smile. "So you're liking what you're doing?"

"More than anything I've ever done. I feel . . . I don't know. It's like I was always meant to be out there. Not away from people, exactly. But closer to the foundation of things."

I hate it when people talk like that. We're never more human than when we're manipulating the natural world.

I don't know why she's annoying me so much all of a sudden. She's just doing her best, studying, taking her tests like the teacher's pet I'm sure she's always been. I was a problem student. It's only luck, and Mark's help, that lets me do what I'm so good at.

Mark wants her to feel herself submerged in the totality of nature. But I'm the one creating that totality, setting up each stage on her progress.

There's no way she'll ever know I'm back here.

A raccoon emerges on the restaurant balcony. How it got here is my secret.

Of all the wild creatures, it is perhaps the raccoon that misses human beings most. The others didn't even notice when humans figured out how to edit themselves out of animal perceptions and return the world to the wild.

Going back to work has been hard on the raccoons. Their mood seems permanently bad.

This one has had it, at least for today. It clambers up onto the table, scattering silverware, and, with grim determination, closes its eyes and goes to sleep. As far as it is concerned, this is a place of concealment, invisible to anyone, and, in fact, nothing out in those woods has a chance of seeing it. A buzzard sweeps close overhead, its eyes questing, but sees nothing but dead leaves and a recovered cougar, now loping off, ready for another go at an elk.

"Is it snoring?" Mria says. "Tell me raccoons don't snore."

Encounter #3

Greenslope

The forested slope is really the roof of an indoor gym and mall. Just above the restaurant, the hill crests, and, out of sight, descends in a succession of apartments. At the slope's base is an open park, its snow trampled by mule deer looking for browse. A small herd of deer stands in a tight group there now, yanking a last bit of grass root out with their teeth.

The big houses on the valley's other side, beyond the concealed highway, are ugly enough that I wish I had the suppressed perceptions of a wild animal.

I also wish I couldn't see the Wild West duster they make me wear here. It's embroidered with lassos and horses.

The spruces and firs overhead hold huge clumps of snow in their needles. A chickadee hangs upside down from a cone and yanks determinedly at a seed. Various other squeaky-voiced small birds jump around the branches, distinguishable as kinglets, nuthatches, and others to those who care to tell them apart. Each has a different diet, and thus different ways of perceiving the world. No one appreciates how hard it is to manage a mixed group like that. Certainly not Paolo, who hasn't stopped talking since he and Berenika sat down.

But Berenika is looking at the birds. She always looks carefully at animals, as if she actually sees them as meaning something in themselves. She raises a hand, and crooks a finger to summon a waiter. Me.

A kinglet flutters down and perches on it. It's unexpected, and her green-brown eyes widen. The kinglet, a tiny greenish bird with an orange crown, walks back and forth on her finger. It actually thinks her finger is a twig, and is looking for signs of hibernating insects beneath the bark. Before anything unfortunate happens, it shoots off again.

Berenika watches after it. She has a gift of meaningful stillness. Snow glitters in her dark hair. She is a nature goddess only temporarily among the worlds of men.

The sun is shining but the air is bohy and cold. Most animals are in hiding, and those that appear are lean, their intentions focused down to survival. Winter rakes through with sharp teeth, giving the survivors a bigger space to grow in the summer. The pain of survival is most obvious at this season, and the restaurant does a good business when it's cold.

Giant bluish cubes of ice, fifty feet on a side, thrust out of the trees. Snow clings to flaws in their surfaces. It always seems that you should be able to look all the way through them, but vision disappears into the deep blue interior. These grab the winter's cold and send it back through heat exchangers in the summer to cool the buildings below, as they melt and cascade down the rocks, disappearing by the time fall brushes the leaves from the trees.

A puff of breeze, and light snow races across the tables. Berenika and Paolo wear folded clothes like elaborate tents, with velvet caps. Warm air puffs from their sleeves when they lean forward, melting the snow into droplets. Paolo has his set so high he's sweating. He's picked this place to please Berenika. He prefers things to be a little more comfortable.

"So, Berenika," he says. "How have you been doing?"

Right now, Berenika is doing what she is supposed to be doing. She is looking for the cougar. Her brief hesitation before answering the question creases Paolo's wide face. He's laid some kind of plan, but is having trouble putting it into operation.

"Oh, Paolo! Sorry. I'm doing good. I can't believe I waited so long to do what I wanted to. It's hard work. But I wouldn't want to do anything else."

"But you haven't heard from. . ."

"No. Nothing from Mark. I kind of wish everyone—"

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry. Mria was wondering, and you know how she is. She'd be all over me if I didn't ask. I'm glad you could find the time to come out here with me. I thought maybe you would like it."

"I do, Paolo, I do. I've always heard of it."

"It seemed like your kind of place."

Both of them are uncomfortable. Neither expected to ever be in this situation.

"I've been doing well too," Paolo says.

"Really? What have you been up to?"

"You know, the usual. But well, you know." Paolo starts again. "Do you have any, like, wider plans? For your life outside of nature?"

"Not really. I've been pretty focused."

Paolo sighs. A gust at the same moment makes it seem that his inability to move her has shaken the snow from the trees.

"Does he still live in the desert?" Paolo asks.

Berenika has sensed movement in the trees along the meadow's edge. "What?"

"Does Mark still live in that desert place? I liked those parties he had out there."

Berenika manages to tear her attention from the signs of the cougar's presence. She leans forward and puts her hand over Paolo's. Both are gloved, so it's not as intimate as it might be.

"Give him a call if you want, Paolo. I'm sure he'd love to hear from you."

"Really?"

"Really. He always said . . ." She's moved too fast, and now has to come up with something Mark always said. "He said you were good company. And he liked it when you mixed the drinks."

"Yeah, well. I always liked him too. I mean, I understand why it had to end and all, but . . ."

Unlike the elk, the mule deer don't get a reprieve. One is momentarily distracted, trying to yank a particularly sweet grass tuft. There's a puff of snow as the cougar leaps, and then the lead buck is down. It kicks its legs once, but the cougar's teeth sink in and crush its windpipe. That may be unnecessary. It looks like its head's impact with the frozen ground has been enough to take it out.

The cougar breathes hard for a few moments, then lowers its head and starts to feed.

It looks easy. Without a knowledge of what is going on, it all looks easy. The deer weighs as much as the cougar, and carries a multipointed rack that can stab a lung or a gut. Even a small injury can be fatal, if it impairs the ability to hunt. The cougar has to average over a dozen pounds of meat a day to survive a winter. Any interruption in the flow of calories and protein is death. The cougar has been watching for the past two hours, patiently waiting for the exact moment that carried the highest odds.

A waiter just has to stand attentively, but gets relatively less for the effort. And he has to wear a stupid outfit.

The cougar raises its head. Something about the open space of the meadow is bothering it. The mule deer think they have moved off to another high valley, as they do when a predator appears, but there is actually no room for that here. They will circle the dining area and reemerge exactly where they were before. Pika move in their long runs under the snow-covered grass, and, a hundred yards away, a porcupine grunts along a freshly fallen log, tearing bark away to get at the still-fresh living layer beneath. Everything else is silent.

What else does the cougar sense?

It sinks teeth into the carcass, and, with a couple of powerful bounds, hauls it straight up the cliff.

It drops it near the table, right next to Berenika, then resumes its meal. Steam rises from the entrails of the dead elk.

Unlike the others, Berenika does not watch it. Instead, she scans everyone else in the restaurant, a gaze she usually devotes only to the animals. No one is feeding with quite the gusto of the cougar. Berenika has snow in her eyelashes. Sometimes the cougar has that same look. It is a solitary, as private as possible, used to sliding past perception without affecting it. Knowing it is in full view all the time would leave it with the feline equivalent of despair. It could not live that way.

"Is he here?" Paolo hunches forward miserably.

"Who?" Berenika says.

"Mark! He's got to be here. Somewhere."

She looks almost frightened. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he can't just let you go. I can't stand it that he let you go."

The cougar curves around a couple of times, then lies down on the mule deer carcass and goes to sleep. There's plenty of meat left on it, and its own body heat is the only way it's going to keep it from freezing solid overnight. The deer's head gazes blankly at us, its bloody tongue hanging out of its mouth.

Encounter #4 *Plaza Econtoro*

The plaza outside the Cafe Kulfi is a piece of marsh most of the way to becoming a meadow, with a thick patch of oaks at the edge. The squirrels and birds in the branches sense deeper forest behind them, not a brick wall. There's still some open water, so there are muskrats, never the most popular animal to watch, but an important part of the system. They serve as food for the mink pair that nest under the cheese shop.

It's a nice spring day, and quite a few people are out.

My hot dog cart's umbrella conceals a rainforest canopy microenvironment. Bromeliads and orchids dangle from its ribs. Mist drifts down over the relish tray.

Berenika walks slowly through the plaza. She's graceful, every part of her long body involved, and her feet seem to barely touch the ground. She's cut her thick hair even shorter and now wears it unclipped. Her jacket ends at her waist. Her trousers are made of some flowy material.

She's hunting for something. She doesn't peer around, but it's clear from the way she looks off into some invisible distance that she's letting all of her senses open all the way, so that even the slightest hint will make itself known. I thought she was waiting for Paolo or Mria before going up into the Cafe Kulfi, where I worked on her world for the first time, but neither have shown and it's starting to look like she's on her own today.

Despite my mini rainforest, she doesn't pay any attention to my stand. She's been in training for months, so surely she recognizes the virtuoso technique involved. It's a clear signal, directly to her. She's not usually so obtuse.

The riot of rainforest life under my umbrella is hard to put together and even harder to maintain, right above a great selection of bratwurst and all-beef hotdogs. You could spend an hour looking at moths get nectar from orchids, ants crawl up stems, tree frogs count for crickets. I'm doing good business, good enough that I can't pay as much attention to her as I want. It's a point of pride that I get the orders right.

Even though it's right in their face, everyone misses the three-toed sloth at first. It hangs amid the leaves, its fur green with algae, its yellow claws hooked around an umbrella rib, and chews on the same leaf it's been working on for the past half an hour.

Berenika kneels and peers into the animal waste recycler just past a set of stairs. But it's clean. She can't tell how recently the cougar who owns this territory has been here.

She turns, and for a moment, I think she's going to walk over and get a hot dog. I do have to wear this ridiculous purple and orange jacket that clashes with the orchids. I've sweated through the pits. Still, I want her to.

Finally, our cougar slinks into the plaza. It glances toward the Cafe Kulfi. It still remembers the unexpected nose burn and won't go up there unless it has a good reason.

It has other things to worry about. It is well into the other male's range, and this time is completely aware of it. Its ears flick back and forth. A cougar has thirty separate muscles in its ear and it's using every one to swivel them, trying to extract all the information the environment has to offer.

Each step forward is a serious consideration. Since it's here, it believes that it is here to challenge the other cougar. Like anything above a certain level of consciousness, it believes it acts because of decisions it has made. And, like anything above a certain level of consciousness, it is wrong.

As soon as it appears, Berenika is aware of it. She doesn't turn toward it, but I can see the way her back stretches out, fine shoulder blades against the fabric of her jacket. She stands very still: irrelevant, since the cougar can't see her. It's almost a courtesy. Her hands float without weight.

I didn't understand her before, and now I'm kind of sorry about that raccoon. She's not just fooling around. She's as serious about life as I am. She could be the rare Trainer that could be seen, and still do her job.

The cougar whose territory we're in comes out of the Cafe Kulfi and stands at the top of the stairs. It is significantly larger and stronger than our cougar, full-sized at 170 pounds, eight feet long. Everyone in the plaza falls silent and watches as it swishes its tail impatiently. Since this is its territory, it is the local favorite. They wait to see what it will do to the interloper.

Somewhere around here, Mark appears and comes back into her life. That's the story. And the cougar, no longer needed, goes. Sure, there's always a chance it will defeat its larger and stronger opponent. Nothing is certain.

But the smart money's on the muscle.

The territory owner crouches down to charge. It is ready. Our cougar is going to find out that it is no longer the center of attention.

Berenika strolls toward the cafe, not giving any sign that she sees the other cougar. I should be watching the cougars, but, instead, I watch her. She looks like she's just window-shopping, but I know she's not seeing anything in the vitrines. Her consciousness is focused forward.

She steps right into the other cougar's path. It is ready to leap . . . and suddenly its opponent has vanished. All it can really sense is the absence that is Berenika, because it can't detect a human being. A shadow has dropped over its world, and it is confounded.

Suddenly coming to itself, realizing the perilous situation it is in, our cougar turns and bounds out of the plaza.

There is a stir among everyone else in the plaza. They resume whatever they were doing. But they feel vaguely cheated, unfulfilled. A crucial plot point was muffed.

That's because they're paying attention to the wrong story.

"Excuse me."

Berenika came up silently as I watched the cougar vanish. She catches me off guard.

Our eyes meet through the mist that comes from my umbrella. As a gesture, the sloth even turns its head, jaws still working on its leaf, to look at her.

She realizes the complexity of what I have achieved here. And, seeing that, she's scoped out who is responsible for the events around her. She has an instinctive feel for the behavior of living creatures. Seeing the effects, she's tracked down the cause: me.

"I'd like two hot dogs, please."

Two? She really doesn't need to get one for me. It's my stand, after all. "Um, sure. That's what I'm here for."

"One with mustard and relish."

"Okay."

"And one with lots of hot peppers, sauerkraut, and epizote, if you have any."

It's not something I'd usually know about an employer, but Mark had me make him his favorite dog when we were setting this scene up, the day before. Peppers, sauerkraut, and—

"No epizote." I still have some, but he's not getting it. "Out today."

"Well." She sighs. "We can't always get what we want, can we?"

"No," I say. "I guess not."

I watch her, graceful and slim, as she crosses the plaza and heads right for the corpse of trees where Mark stands, seemingly invisible from the world, waiting to emerge into the midst of a battle to the death between cougars for a single territory.

Last Encounter *Anhinga*

The water just beyond the table is still and black. The cypress trees in the hammock stretch above, forming a thick canopy, screening the bright sun. The air is hot, heavy, motionless. Spanish moss, vines, flowers dangle down, dripping water. The only detectable motion is that of an occasional insect flying slowly, almost walking on the thick air. Tiny beams with motion detectors pick them out and highlight their lacy wings against the dimness, subtly enough that the patrons take it for granted that they can see things here, despite having evolved on the sunny, dry veldt.

There's no reason why nature shouldn't always look her best.

Paolo, Mria, Berenika, and Mark have fallen silent as they wait for their food. Mark is never chatty, and Paolo and Mria have been trying to fill in the spaces, showing, by their eagerness to entertain, their gratitude that things are back the way they should be, but they've run out of things to talk about.

Mark paid their way out here. That's their notion of the way things should be.

Berenika hasn't been talking much. Is she already regretting her decision to get back with him?

"Look, there's one." Paolo points as an alligator slides by, careful not to thrust his finger over the railing.

No one else looks.

"What's wrong?" Mark finally says. "I knew this was a mistake. Too wet, right? We should get back to the house. The desert. That's best."

"No," Berenika says. "That's not it. This is extremely impressive. I might like to work here, actually."

Our wetland, lush with water coming from the north, is sandwiched between an office building, all pink stucco and plate glass, and a housing development. Carefully generated mist makes the office building look like a mistake of vision, and the houses hide behind a vine-covered wall. Water is pumped into this patch of jungle, runs through, and then gets recovered on the other side of the restaurant.

Water once sheeted down from the lakes to the north, covered the sawgrass prairies less than an inch deep, all the way down to the south. Development and overuse of water had threatened these environments.

Not much of the sawgrass prairie was left, but the wetland is something people want to see. Water flows have been reestablished, exactly to the necessary degree. Nothing that lives here, in the deep waters or any of the other environments around, senses that it all came via subtle paths completely different than the original ones.

But there's still a lot of work to do. Berenika could make a real contribution.

"But something's bothering you about it."

"Yeah: Paolo," Mria says. "Stop pointing out that stupid alligator every time it swims by. We see it."

Paolo's mouth droops.

"No," Berenika says. "It's the cat."

Our cougar rests on a bough above the black water, barely awake.

"Wrong species of panther?" Paolo flicks through the restaurant's environmental information, eager to make good. "The Florida one's extinct, this one is pretty close, they say. . . ."

"Not the species. The environment. The place. Cougars live in the slash pine woods. In decent-sized limestone uplands. They need some dry land. Not down in the water here. They don't fish."

"Maybe they eat birds," Paolo, on a roll, is pleased to spot the anhinga, the restaurant's signature bird, as it pops out of the water, a dead fish speared on its beak. He starts to point, thinks better of it, and changes his gesture to a wave at the waiter.

He's just going to have to wait. I'm no longer on duty.

The anhinga climbs out on a cypress knee and spends a moment getting the fish off its beak. It's dark, with a long white neck. It swallows the fish, then spreads its wings. Unlike most water birds, anhingas have no oils on their feathers. This permits them to dive deeply, but means they have to dry their wings before attempting flight.

This catches the cougar's attention. There's really no way it can get that anhinga, but, still, it's kind of an interesting intellectual problem, with the tricky approach, the bird's speed, and all. For a sated cat, thinking about ways to catch unpromising prey is like doing crossword puzzles.

"You're right," Mark frowns. "It shouldn't be here."

Neither should I. My job is done. I should be back to my regular work. There're some oak stands to redo in Illinois, and ponds for migratory birds. Those things are hard. The birds have to maintain their ability to navigate thousands of miles, yet not realize they are landing amid observation platforms whenever they come down.

Aside from some species of parrot, birds are never easy to train.

Berenika has slipped away, probably to the bathroom. I didn't notice her go.

In her absence, Mark is checking and sending messages. He's probably finding out where I am, what I'm up to, figuring out that someone who owed me a favor let me set up here in the Everglades, checking water pH and drainage.

Mark isn't the only one with deep resources.

A couple of heavy drops fall on the raft, and it tilts, just slightly, with added weight.

"Do you really think no one can see you?" Berenika says, almost in my ear.

I jerk, but don't knock anything over, and look up. She stands over me, water sheeting down her body, her hair gleaming black.

"How much was real?" she says.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." She moves around the raft, barefoot and silent, and examines the equipment. "Is this what a nature god is? A little man squatting in the underbrush with some display screens?"

"I've never claimed divine status—"

She's in my face. She's disturbing close up, eyes too big, cheekbones too high, skin too velvet. She's meant to be observed from a safe distance.

"How much, Mr. . . . you do have a name, don't you? Mark must allow you a name."

"Tyrell Fredrickson."

"Come on." She glances back at the restaurant. Mria is complaining that there is too much saffron in the flan. There isn't supposed to be any saffron in the flan. No one has missed Berenika yet. "You've been on me, you and your kitty. What did Mark hire you to do?"

"Just to keep you safe. What appears to be the natural world is more dangerous than you—"

She knocks me down and pins me to the raft. The cougar stands up on its bough and looks over at us, exactly as if it can see us both.

I enjoy feeling her weight on me.

"It wasn't all my doing, was it?" she says. "Everything around me. You have the power to control it. Tell me!"

So I do. It's not that I think she's going to kill me, though she's mad enough to try. It's because she sees that which she would like least to see. My assignment was to make her feel like . . . Mark said, "like a nature goddess."

It had been a dream ever since she was a little girl, to have the natural world perceive and respond to her. She'd always had pets, found wounded birds and animals and nursed them back to health, had the ability to sit still for hours and let things come to her. She was perfect for the career I had.

Mark's analysis had shown him that she had left because she felt like she didn't have equal standing with him. She didn't have a valid role. So he decided to give her one.

That's my job, really. To make things seem like they just happen. Of course, if you left the natural world to "just happen," most of it would be dead and decaying in a couple of seasons. Too much of it is gone for the rest of it to live on its own.

"That's pretty much what I thought," she says, and sits back on her heels.

I look at her. I never expected her to go back with Mark, no matter what power she felt. I expected . . . I don't know what I expected. None of it makes sense. Mark wanted her to come back to him, so he made her feel more powerful, more in control. And now she questions the one illusion that makes her feel best about herself.

"I'm going away," I say. "I'm taking a rough job. A weed patch in an old city. No one really likes those mundane restoration jobs. It takes forever, and even when you're done, it doesn't look like much."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"In case . . . if you wonder where I am. What I'm doing."

She shakes her head, smiles at me. "You really don't understand anything, do you?"

"Look—no matter what, you're good at this. Better, probably, than I am. You can—"

"I know what I can do. But what can you do? Are you just going to hide in the leaves and fake it all up for people?"

"It's what I do. I'm a Trainer."

"So am I, now. You think Mark wanted to give me the illusion of power over nature to get me to come back to him. But it's not an illusion, is it? I'm not some kind of nature goddess. That's just dumb. But I do have power over nature. And I love it all. Every bit of it. Do you love it, Tyrell?"

"I do." The answer comes before I think about it.

This time she really looks at me. I'm pale, a little soft, but I think I have some shape to me. A good jaw, and people say my eyes are thoughtful.

Well, my mother said it. She was otherwise pretty honest. She never told me I was strikingly handsome or anything.

"You might still make something of yourself, Tyrell. Then we'll see." Her dive into the water is totally silent.

Berenika. I write these reports for Mark, but he never reads them. Maybe someday you will.

How I Became a Trainer
by Tyrell Fredrickson

You don't really want the whole story, but perhaps this part will help you make sense of it.

Before I became a Trainer, I worked on a farm, at Sty #14, on the thirtieth floor. Sometimes, when my work was done, I'd go out to the plant areas to watch the sun

set. The circulating breeze kept condensation off the glass and made the leaves whisper behind me. From that height I didn't really see people, just buildings copper to the horizon. After a few minutes, something would start beeping. I wasn't really supposed to be in that area. My job was the pork.

I'd go back to the dark. The glow strip across the vat room's arched ceiling was about as bright as a full moon. After all, the pork tubes—pigs, if you insist—couldn't see.

The sterilizing lights came on once a day. Then it was my job to put on goggles and turn the tubes in their vats of liquid, making sure the UV hit all their surfaces. The fluid was full of antibiotics and all that, but there were fungi, there were molds . . . anywhere there was that much cell shedding and organic material something would find a way to live.

The main problem was the skin. The bones were vestigial, floating free from each other like an exploded skeletal diagram, but the things still had skin. They floated in the blue-green support fluid, but they were so huge that there were always folds, or points of pressure against the tank sides, where infection could collect. My job was detecting these areas and taking care of them.

It might seem that you should just get rid of the skin and just have meat, but that would cause more problems than it solved. Skin is a sophisticated interface, keeping in the things that should be in, and keeping almost all of the universe out. Creating some new interface would have been more trouble than it was worth. It might not have seemed that way, but they'd changed only those things that needed changing. For example, collagen had been added, to make the skin easier to remove, when that time came.

The back of pork still looked like a pig. The spine had separated like the boosters of a rocket heading for space, but I could still see a trace of the original shoat, with its bristly hair. If I left them in some other orientation, they would slowly turn to have their backs up.

No one ever visited me there. The meat side of the farm just wasn't that popular. There was an occasional maintenance team, in to adjust the recirculators that turned pork waste into usable fertilizer for the plants on the south side. Otherwise, I was alone with my pigs.

Once a month was slaughtering time.

I'd pull each tube out of the liquid in a support harness. The sterilizing fluid would cascade off its sides. I'd dry the skin, first with a roller and then with an infrared light, and then I would open it up. There was supposed to be a seam, kind of a biological zipper, along where the edge of the belly had once been, but it often got jammed up with squamous cells and other undifferentiated growth.

So I would have to cut it open. I had a vibratory cutter that I would run along the pig's side. Then, being extremely careful, I would roll up the hide. As I mentioned, there was additional collagen that added some tension, so that the skin curled up to expose the meat.

Most of each pig was smooth flesh, suitable for processed food. Without connective tissue or grain, this was easy to work with. I'd run the cutter along the pig's length, and then cut off slabs. There was always a little blood seepage, but not much. The cutter was smart, and the blood supply was spaced rationally. Large vessels would be avoided, and tucked in, to dangle like electrical conduit. I'd hit them with vascularization hormones later, stimulate arborization, and link them up with the new flesh that bubbled up around them.

Then I would supervise the movement of the chops to the cooler, in the blank north side of the building. They'd rumble down one of the conveyors and disappear to the next step in the process of making food. The area was forgotten, with hexagonal ice crystals growing on the housings of seldom-used support pumps, and fluid spills that

eventually turned into sheets of brown-red ice. My least favorite part of the job was defrosting and cleaning that.

Things did go wrong. Cancers could spread through the flesh when cell reproduction was disrupted. This could happen surprisingly fast. Sometimes an entire tube would have to be terminated and discarded. I had no idea where that flesh went.

Once I heard a rattle as the cutter went by. When I looked at the resulting slab, I found a pig's lower jaw, complete with teeth, all perfectly formed. They looked tiny against that huge bulk, even though they would have been able to support the feeding of a creature that weighed several hundred pounds. I cleaned them off and kept them. There is nothing more diagnostic of a mammal than the elaborate pattern on the surface of the teeth. Someone with more experience than I could have identified what breed of *Sus domestica* had led to this gargantuan meat factory.

I got into my routine. I don't think I was even fully conscious, following out my rounds in the semidarkness, with only the backs of pigs for company.

But that jaw should have made me more attentive. Something had gone wrong with the gene expression in that tube. All the developmental genes were still there, after all, just suppressed. It was only after the cutters hesitated a bit on that same pig that I finally hauled it up out of the fluid to investigate more thoroughly.

It had grown a leg, complete with trotter. It looked ridiculous, down there all by itself, supporting nothing, contacting nothing, but it had the full complement of bones and muscles.

I poked it and it jerked away.

So it had some basic innervation as well. I was going to have to do something about this.

Sometimes a consumer gets a hankering for a real differentiated piece of meat, something with connective tissue, muscle strands, bone: a ham, a rib, a chop. These tubes had not been designed to produce those. Even in those that had been, what looked like ancestral cuts of meat were sculpted creations, not actual muscles attached to limbs.

The hoof looked tiny and precise. Something about it appealed to me. I decided to keep it for a while. I had the idea that I was liberating some essential nature hidden in the huge tube of meat. I reprogrammed the slab cutters to avoid it. That dropped my overall productivity a bit, but still well within the quotas I had for this sty.

Sentimentality has no place in farming. I really should have known that.

Next harvest, that leg threw the slab cutter off so much it pulled back, forcing me to slice meat manually. I wasn't used to the auxiliary blade, and the flesh shuddered so much when I lowered myself to it that I almost sliced through a finger.

Maintaining a sentimental piece of real pig quickly proved to be tiresome. And a health and safety inspection would show poor practice. My real career was elsewhere, but losing points here could really set me back.

At the next skin maintenance time, I rotated that tube so that the leg stuck out toward me. I pulled myself up to it. The leg's joint was right at the skin surface. That was good. There would be no telltale stump left afterward, and the cutters would be able to do their job. I got right up to the thing, pushing my head against its side, and slid the auxiliary blade into the leg.

It kicked me. I lost my grip and almost fell into the tank myself. I did drop the saw, and lost it somewhere in those translucent depths. The leg flailed several more times, then was still. But it was pulled back against the tube's bulk, as if ready to attack again.

A shudder went through the entire thing, sending waves splashing back and forth against the tank sides. Blood seeped from the cut and dripped down.

Muscle and bone were one thing, but the thing had nerves, and had recruited a blood supply.

What had given the command to kick me? The nerves led somewhere.

Maybe I was mad at it, but I had given up on careful surgery. I had to get this thing fixed and back on the production line. I recovered my blade from the tank bottom and slashed deeply, checking for any variations in the meat's otherwise smooth structure.

I found and removed a couple of ribs and a big fold of tissue that I later figured out was a bladder, one that had never managed to grow in on itself to hold fluid. A bit of ureter led off from it, but it had never regrown a kidney, so the tube just ended.

Beneath that, along the spine, I found a lump. This was the creature's real secret.

It had never grown a dura mater, much less cranial bones, and most of the brain had never grown either, but here was a bit of the pig's brain, barely protected by a flexible arachnoid and pia mater, material like stiff rubber.

The original pig had a fair amount of cortex. It was an intelligent animal.

This tube of meat was not an intelligent animal. But even then I knew enough of the structure of the mammalian nervous system to have some idea of what had regrown. It was a bit of the motor cortex: what had allowed the thing to kick me. And much of the sensory cortex: what had allowed it to feel me probing it.

There was no comfort I could give. Nothing I could do to help. It couldn't see, it couldn't hear, it couldn't taste. But it could feel pain.

It was just a mistake. Just a malfunction in gene expression, the generation of nerve cells with no consumption value. I thought about how long it had been shuddering under the slices of the cutter. The innervation had gone much farther than I would have thought possible. It sensed everything that was going on, everything that happened to it.

It was silent in that huge room. I sat there, kind of stroking the part of the skin that was left. I had no idea if it could feel that too.

A damage report was called for, so that others could be on the lookout for a similar malfunction.

But I didn't tell anyone. I excised the brain, the nerves, the other organs.

Then I sautéed those no-longer-functional pain centers in butter. The ultimate dis-courtesy to a food animal is to kill it but not to eat it.

I think I overcooked them. They were a bit crumbly. But I choked them down.

Okay, this isn't why I became a Trainer. But it's why I've never quit. We've picked something up, and now there's no way for us to ever put it down again. Now that you bear some of the weight, Berenika, maybe you understand.

Non-encounter

Mark and Berenika's Desert Residence

I go through every room of the house, as if someone will be hiding in one of them.

But there's nowhere to hide. The furniture is gone, and the rooms, floored with native stone, seem to have been vacuumed by forensics teams and retain not a trace of their previous occupants.

The high living room windows show the distant dry ridge, tilting like a sinking ship.

I hear a thunk from the underground garage, then voices. A man and a woman.

I was sure Berenika would leave him again. It just didn't make sense that she would stay. But instead she was taking advantage of his power. I thought they were far away, restoring some part of the dead ocean, not here to find me scuttling across their floor like a hermit crab that had misplaced its shell, pale and shrivel-assed.

"Who are you?"

It's Paolo. He stands tall and skinny in the doorway's exact center, as if demonstrating how unnecessarily wide it is.

"I—"

"Oh, you know him." The short, blond Mria pushes past him, carrying a bag that seems symbolic of "groceries": leafy celery and a baguette stick out of the top. "The Trainer. Mark's guy."

"Mark's guy." Paolo's eyes are pale blue. I had not noticed how clear and perceptive they were. I hadn't really been watching him, and he certainly had never looked at me before. "What is he doing here, then?"

"I don't know." Mria is already in the kitchen. "Maybe he's training gophers. Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm here to put some things away," I say. This is even almost true. At least it is now.

"Hey, us too," Paolo says. "We can start a club. 'People who clean up after Mark and Berenika.'"

"Don't be bitter, Paolo." Mria is opening and closing cabinets. "Didn't they say they'd leave a saucepan in . . . oh, there it is. She just asked us for a favor, since we were going to be in the neighborhood."

There was no neighborhood. Mark had, impressively, put his house where there really was nothing, an expanse of dry ridges and valleys in the Great Basin. The most visible life in the region was a herd of pronghorns that tended to keep well south, where there was more water. The only plant visible is an occasional sullen creosote bush. Those black sticks suck all the moisture from the dirt around them, leaving a circle so dry that no seed would ever germinate there. Their kingdoms are tiny and parched, but they are supreme within them.

"You hid your car," Paolo says.

"Habit."

"So what were you going to do here?"

"Maybe he's moving here." Mria pokes her head in from the kitchen. Behind her, I hear something frying. "You want some lunch, Mr. Animal Trainer? We're going to have to pack out what we don't eat."

I'd never pegged Mria as a cook. But then I hadn't paid that much attention to her, either. I'd been watching Berenika.

"Sure," I say. "I didn't bring anything to contribute."

"Didn't figure that you would." She vanishes back into the kitchen.

"Berenika's going to be a Trainer too," Paolo says. "She's going to find out what really makes things tick."

"It's a long, hard road," I say. "Much less fun than it looks."

"She knows all about that," Paolo says. "You probably explained some of it to her."

"I tried."

"You're not going to ask, are you." Mria hands me linen-wrapped silverware and has me set the table. "Berenika's gone back to Mark, and both of them are off on some atoll trying to restore fish stocks, train tuna to protect themselves, whatever, and you're going to pretend you don't even care."

"I don't have the right to care," I finally manage.

"The forks go on the other side," Mria says briskly. "You don't need some kind of standing to care."

"Oh, come on." Paolo slouches above us, unsure of what to do. "He just failed. He wanted to set things up a certain way, train Berenika to move to him, and he didn't do it."

I try to do it slowly, but I think they hear me let my breath out.

"Don't you guys need to protect those fish?" Mria says. "Go ahead. I'll lay everything else out."

"The fish," Paolo says on the way down the stairs to the lower levels. "Did you put them here?"

"My first project for Mark," I say. "They're an almost-vanished subspecies—agriculture had dropped the water table and their caves were going dry. They seem to be breeding pretty well here. I hope the new owner takes care of them."

"It's in the deed. You have to. If you don't want to, buy somewhere else."

Many people think that the way we fool nature now shows our power. But it equally enslaves us to perpetual care.

Or some of us, anyway.

In the cool darkness we could hear the water swirling beneath our feet and in the walls. A still pool filled the floor's center. We stand on its edge, looking down and seeing the passages receding in all directions into the earth.

The pool has a blue glow now that we're here. The fish can't see it, but it lets us see them.

"Did you . . . make this?" Paolo's eyes are large in the dimness.

"I worked it out. There were objections. There's no geology anywhere near here that could remotely have water-filled caverns like this, but Mark offered to finance it, and it really was the best option. You can't have everything perfect."

Blind fish have eyes. Or, rather, they develop eyes normally, up to a point. The genes that guide the development of the eyes is still there, still active. An eyecup develops, a lens. Then, another gene, busily beefing up the front of the head, increasing the sense of smell, the barbels, the whole chemical/physical sense structure that the fish needs to survive in the absolute darkness of limestone caverns a thousand feet underground, finally gets its bulldozers and concrete mixers into the area—and builds right over the eye. It sinks under that new flesh, and vanishes.

I wave my hand over the water. This was once Berenika's great pleasure, Mark had told me. The one thing about the house that had entranced her. I want to see what she saw.

And they come. The fish swim out of their underground grottos and out into the dim blue glow of that room. Their skin is pure white, patterned with blue, like tattoos. Their drooping barbels let them sense what is around them. They swirl up, never touching each other, sensing the pressure of the others, searching for their microscopic food.

I hold my finger over the water, but don't touch it. It's best for them if they never know anyone else is here. It's too late, anyway. Even if they knew I was here, that I had determined their destinies, they wouldn't care.

"Come on," I say to Paolo.

The controls make everything automatic, but it still seems that we need to be there to supervise. I carefully check the sandy floor for any obstructions and find. . .

Paolo stands next to me and looks down.

"Was that your cat?" he says.

"Not at all," I say. "Just a companion. We worked together for a while. And then—"

"And now it works for Mark too?"

The footprint is clear. I'm tempted to say too clear, as if it was rolled there for police identification. But over here, it looks like the cougar slept. A cave might seem a good place of concealment for it.

No way of telling how long ago it had been here.

"Will they . . . will they be okay under there?" Paolo says.

"The system is sealed and recirculating," I tell him. "Left for long enough, sure. This cave won't survive the fall of civilization or anything. But long before they have any trouble, someone will be here to clean it up, keep them fed and alive."

The cover looks like heavy stone, though I know it's just a foamed metal alloy

with a thin cover of fused rock dust. It slides across the pool, across the cougar footprint, across the vague traces we ourselves have left down there, and the blue glow vanishes. The house's life is concealed until someone returns to reveal it again.

The cougar never knew I was there, so it can't miss me, but it must be able to detect a difference in its life now that I have left it.

"Come on up." Mria calls from upstairs. "Lunch is ready."

"What are you going to do now?" Paolo says.

"I have another project."

"Mark must have paid you a bundle. It must be something pretty wild."

"Not so wild," I say. "Just something that needs to get done."

Potential encounter *Urban Study Area #7*

Sometimes a chunk of decorative plaster crashes down from the coffered ceiling high overhead. This usually happens a couple of days after a heavy rain. The water percolates through the various remaining layers of the railway station roof. You'd think there wouldn't be an acanthus swag or gilded rosette left up there, but the builders had not stinted on unseen decoration.

Sometimes it happens for no reason at all, like this morning. I jerk awake, hearing just the echoes of a distant crash.

Usually I get up and search, trying to figure out which piece it was that had just been added to the rubble on the waiting room floor. I don't know what the point of that is, but I do feel good when I see fresh edges, as if I'm finally getting a grip on how things work around here.

I don't feel like doing that today. I just wiggle myself deeper into my bag and watch the pale light of morning glow in the high windows. The pigeons that have left a crust over the glass shift and complain on their perches high above.

I've been here a few months now, and still find it ridiculous. Had absolutely everyone left this city and headed for better places? It had once been huge. I can walk the old streets for days, clamber carefully across rusting bridges, jump across the pits of collapsed sewers. None of it was set up to interact with nature. It comes from a purely human world, now obsolete.

Most of it collapsed and was swept into sinuous ridges, twenty or thirty feet high. Forests slowly spread across them. There's a small modern city up the river a bit, but it has its own environment and I never take any animals there.

So now I live among weeds: spiky leaved plants, muck-loving carp, fast-growing trees, pigeons. I hunt among the herds of stunted deer that browse the grass between fallen branches of locusts and silver maples. Sometimes a pack of canids makes its quarrelsome way through the area. A cross between domestic dogs and coyotes, they are unromantic, unphotogenic, and unclear. No Trainer has ever worked to get them to set their carrion-smelling paws on a city street. No passerby has ever been struck at dawn by their wild beauty. When I hear them yelping at night I stuff my head into my pillow.

A crow calls outside, so it really is time to get up. All of the animals can see me, but only that crow seems to care. It has a kind of reptilian affection for me, based on the small prey I scare up on my hunts, and I sometimes find it staring fixedly at me, head sidewise, considering me with an expressionless yellow-rimmed eye. I work at not attributing human emotions to it, but always fail. Maybe I wasn't meant for my line of work after all.

At least I haven't given it a name. That's the most obvious way we pretend animals are more ours than they actually are. I figure it respects me, but is puzzled by me.

Our lives are pretty similar just now, so we get along. The bird can predict in general what I am going to do next, but not specifically, and that is the basis of a decent relationship.

There is no natural world. If the term ever had meaning, it hasn't for years. Jeremiads about how the natural world will unite and turn against humans are a childish fantasy. Nature has no motivations, no desires, no ultimate goal.

Except what we choose to give it. I finally roll out of my bag, wash my face in the basin I always fill before going to sleep, and go outside. It's overcast, and cold. My breath puffs. I like feeling the weather against me. Having little defense against it, I have to react to it the same way everything else alive has to. I listen to the air, sniff it to see how scents are carrying today, listen to any sounds it brings. I'm here and visible. I can be evaded, I can be resisted, I can be killed. I pay full attention.

Outside, something on the ground catches my eye. I kneel to get a better look. I reach out my hand, but pull it back before my fingertips can disturb anything.

It's a partial print: a big heel pad, and two toe marks. No claw indentations, and it looks pretty good-sized. Cat. It looks like a large cat.

I bend over the imprint and push my face almost to the ground, looking and smelling, using every channel of information I can. I smell cat, too.

Could be a lynx. I've seen some other, ambiguous traces. A lynx would be okay.

I don't think it's a lynx. A few days ago I found a piece of scat. Like the print, it was big, bigger than your usual coydog turd. And it had a bit of hair in it, as from self-grooming with a rough tongue. I managed to persuade myself that it was just the right shade of reddish brown.

I stand up, ready for my day. If there really is a cougar out here somewhere, I won't see it. In an even contest, I don't have a chance. But I'll keep looking.

Anyone could find me here, if they wanted. Berenika has to know where I am. She could come here and observe me in my natural habitat. If she wanted.

It's ridiculous. A feral housecat could make it here in this shrunk weed patch, for as long as it evaded the coydogs, but chances were lower for a lynx, and a cougar was impossible. A cougar needed more than ten square miles of territory to support itself, probably significantly more in this impoverished ecology, and there was nothing like that here, not yet. A single kill and the deer would flee elsewhere. These are not trained to forget, circle around, and return. Again, not yet.

So there's work to be done. The various patches of woods can be knitted together in the minds of the beasts that are here. That's what we do. We take the far-flung archipelagos of environment and reassemble them into continents in the minds of the animals. We give them a way to live in the world we have made.

So I live, work, and hope.

I imagine Berenika, somewhere in an abandoned room in the city, in a brick row house standing alone amid the trees, like a single book on an empty shelf. Since I'm imagining it, I imagine detail. She's in an old bedroom where someone changed wallpaper every year. The warmth and moisture she's brought into the room have loosened its glue, and the soft paper peels off in layers, showing different colors. When she awakes before dawn, it's to the whisper of falling florals and beribboned hunting horns.

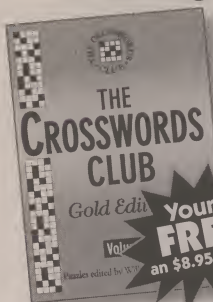
I don't actually believe she's there. She's got more important things to pay attention to.

Mark is the kind of guy who thinks that making his wife stronger is the way to keep her. That makes him hard to compete with. But I've worked with him, and know he can be tiresome. A jerk, really. And, pathetic huddled voyeur or not, I know what I'm doing. That can be attractive. There is some room for hope.

Meanwhile, I have work to do. ○

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Derek Zumsteg tells us that his “favorite weird thing about Berlin is how strange the pizza is, which is like what aliens would put together if they were working from the vaguest description (there’s bread, you put food on it and bake the whole thing. . . .)” In his third story for *Asimov’s*, we have an opportunity to witness just how bizarre interactions in Berlin might get when . . .

TICKET INSPECTOR GLIDEN BECOMES THE FIRST MARTYR OF THE GLORIOUS HUMAN UPRISING

Derek Zumsteg

Two young urchins, carapaces soft and flexible, stood on the edge of the Wedding U-bahn platform. They wore beautiful patterned white silk hoodies shimmering with pigments running into the ultraviolet, and shifted their weight from two feet to two feet, uneasy, bracing against a cold, heavy wind through the station that smelled of metal and concrete.

Behind them, in the U-6 train they hoped to ride for free, Phillip Gliden hid his smile behind a newspaper. The kids had seen and dismissed him: ticket inspectors wore comfortable warm clothes, sneakers, and a badge on a chain around their necks. He’d worn his nice suit, badge tucked into the breast pocket, and decent, well-shined shoes. And where inspectors stepped out at stations to change cars, allowing cheaters to spot them, Gliden waited patiently.

The rest of the car cooperated, not looking at the inspector or the aliens, offering no clues in their blank expressions. Gliden folded his paper to the takeover negotiation coverage but didn’t read. He knew. He found their kids everywhere, even way out on the surface trains, bright new clothes among the commuters wearing rad counters, and Berlin’s downtown stations were rich all day long with the parent generation.

The two youngsters made their move, heavy-hooded eyes followed by a full-body scamper to just beat the closing doors. Gliden stood as the alien kids warbled at each other, doing a passable imitation of smug human satisfaction, slapping hands to hands. Gliden put the badge around his neck, straightened, and smiled politely.

The car of Berlin commuters glanced over, noticing the badge, and returned to ignoring each other.

The urchins smelled like grilled lamb. Gliden's stomach growled, and he blushed. This happened to him every time he had to deal with aliens, and it was embarrassing.

"Excuse me," Gliden said, "may I see your tickets please?"

"What?" they both asked, heads swiveling over the immaculate shoulders of their sweatshirts. Their little localization implants, tiny metal pendants around their heads, had picked up his address and pushed them to German in response. Gliden wished he'd tried starting in Swahili, or Finnish.

"Your tickets, please." They stared at him, one black eye of the four blinking shut slowly. "I'm a ticket inspector," he added.

"You are?" one asked.

Gliden knew this reaction too well. Even his boss chastised him for taking the job too seriously when he dressed up. No other ticket inspector bothered. But playing at other people distracted Gliden from the job of near-constant motion, artificial light, being stacked in with his fellow passengers smelling of wet clothes, walking through the faint urine sting of stations beyond the S41/42 ring while the rad counter ticked angrily at him.

Gliden loved the suit. It was heavy wool, warm, comfortable, and it made him look like a detective. Being handsome helped his confidence, and a confident, handsome Gliden could sometimes turn asking a bored woman for her ticket into an initially charming three or four date relationship. Then, her journey over, she would dump him and pretend not to recognize him the next time they met on the train.

The aliens with big lightless eyes gave him that same blank look.

"You don't have tickets? I'll have to write you up. Can I see your identity cards?"

They pulled their EU-issued identification from their sweatshirt pockets. Gliden clipped them to his ticket pad.

"It's not fair," one of the urchins said.

"No, it really is not," Gliden agreed, writing the ticket, a fine fifty times the one-way fare. "Though we might not agree on the why and in which direction. Please step off the car with me."

He prompted them out onto Rickendorf Strasse, where stairs wet from rain tracked down reflected grey cloud-filtered sunlight.

"Do you know who we are?"

"I have the relevant information from your identification cards, but thank you for volunteering to help." He continued to write as they struggled to find their way back to the conversation they wanted to be having.

"Your suit," the first said. "You don't dress like an inspector."

"No," Gliden said. He tore the tickets, held them out with the ID cards. "These are your tickets."

"The paper!" the second one said, pointing two hands at the folded *Berliner Zeitung*. "Did you read it? Our—" the loc pickup sounded two sharp beeps. "Our f-father? He is in the picture there."

Faintly, Gliden sensed the next train approaching through the soft soles of his shoes. He tried to nod at the tickets in his outstretched hand, then suggest them with eyebrows. He cleared his throat and gave the slips of paper an even larger nod.

"What if I don't take that?" the second one said. "What happens?"

"Then you'll still have a ticket and no instructions on how to pay it," Gliden said.

For years he'd dealt with urchins, punks, rebels, crotchety old men, partisans of the DDR, drunks, sleepless, druggies, the unbalanced, and packs of football fans.

They always took the ticket. They'd argue, swear, rant about the government. Sometimes they'd stare at him and hope to win through intimidation, mercy, or convenient distraction. Gliden waited them out. Usually only a few seconds, sometimes a couple of minutes, and, once, a half hour outside Olympiastadion. They always took the ticket.

Both aliens spotted something down the platform, out of his vision, and began to chirp and wave over his head. Gliden looked and saw, among the wincing early-lunch business people, tourists, and government officials on errands, two adult versions of the grubs approaching. They stood taller, far stiffer, both in council uniforms.

One wore a grey, unadorned one-piece wrap. The other's deep blue suit was nearly covered with tiny, randomly shaped medals. That would be the junior, who needed to advertise, Gliden thought. His boss wouldn't.

"How can I help you?" the elder asked.

"I've issued these two fines for riding without tickets," Gliden said. "They're refusing to take their copy."

The two younger ones both split their eyes to look hopefully at each adult.

"You must cooperate," the senior said, in German for Gliden's benefit.

The two kids closed four eyes together. On the far tracks, a complaining U-8 departed, squealing. The grubs snatched their tickets and left, making presumably obscene gestures at Gliden with their three-fingered hands once behind the adult's wide vision.

"Kids," Gliden sighed.

"We're about to take the U-4, Inspector," the senior said. "Could you join us?"

Gliden wanted to eat and have a coffee to take the chill off. Hanging out with the lamb-smelling pair would only make things worse. But all metro employees were instructed to be as helpful to their new administrators as possible.

"Certainly," Gliden said.

The smell of unshowered man and unlaundered clothes announced the groggy shamble of Monotone Max, who delivered his begging pleas with worn, tired disinterest.

"Good morning, Phillip, did you save any donner for me?" he asked, breathing beer smell over Gliden and holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the overhead lights and long tangles of dirty hair.

"Max, can you take the next train, please?"

Max shrugged under his battered overcoat as the short U-4 slowed to a stop past them. "Are these—"

"Yes," Gliden said.

"Are you a co-worker of our ticket inspector friend?" the senior asked Max, who made a puzzled expression.

"What is happening?" the junior asked, eyes flicking back and forth along the length of the platform and the empty space before him.

"This is a half-train," Gliden said. "Do you see the markings? Half-trains pull forward on the platform."

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"Why aren't the trains consistent in size?"

"We should get on," Gliden prompted.

His countrymen, with admirable composure, waited for the two bulky aliens to enter with Gliden trailing, then filled the car as if there was nothing unusual about sitting across the aisle from sweet-smelling alien cockroach dignitaries.

"Do you give a ticket to everyone you catch?" the junior asked.

"Almost always," Gliden said.

"How often?"

The tone sounded and the doors closed.

At the other end of the car, with a great resigned sigh, Max began his pitch. "Good morning everyone my name is Max—"

"Max!" Gliden yelled down the car, and the two aliens twitched. Max stopped. "No, Max!" He turned back to the delegates. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Are there circumstances," the senior said, "in which you might use your judgment as an officer and display leniency toward an offender?"

New species, same tune. They looked at him without expression.

"Excuse me for a minute, please," Gliden said. His fellow Germans had paid Gliden the courtesy of pretending everything was normal, and he would return the favor.

"Ticket, please?" he asked the person nearest the car's rear door. She produced her pass while staring intently at a fascinating tour guide advertisement at the car's midpoint, over the two consul delegates. It showed a bright young lady smiling and pointing into the hopeful future while leading a group of esteemed alien guests ("Bekommen Menschlicherreisefuhrer!"). Perhaps eighty percent of the car kept rereading that sign without looking down at the less cartoony counterparts.

Gliden worked through the car, glancing at each ticket and pass until entering Max's smell-based clearing.

"Do you have a ticket, Max? Today I have to ticket you . . ."

Max smiled. "Phillip, Phillip, Phillip. I have waited so long for this." He held out a validated AB ticket with a clear boot imprint on it. He gave Gliden a wink.

"Thank you." Gliden nodded and returned to the aliens. They held out BC one-way tickets for him.

"I'm afraid you need a zone AB ticket," Gliden said.

"This is the two-zone," the junior said. "We chose the lowest cost two-zone ticket."

"You have to buy a ticket that covers each zone you're going through. You're in A zone now, and traveling to B."

"Two-zone isn't both zones?" the junior asked.

"I'm confused," the senior said.

"Yes, in Brussels—"

Gliden shook his head and pulled his ticket book out. "I have to write you a ticket."

"Shouldn't there be a standardized human transport ticketing system?" the junior asked.

Gliden nodded. "That would make sense."

"We'll fix that," the senior said. "I understand setting a stern example with the immatures. Why would we buy a cheaper ticket? Your money has no value."

Gliden sensed the stir in the car, like another distantly approaching train, and felt his heart speed up. He looked around to see passengers paying attention, watching him for cues.

"Then equally you should not mind the added expense of a ticket," he said quickly, projecting his voice a little more to be heard, "there are far more important issues in front of you than blaming the ticket system for your purchase."

He got a few nods.

"It's inefficient and confusing," the junior one said. "Inefficient in all ways."

"If I may," Gliden said, glancing around again for support, "once you're familiar with the system, it makes sense. The A zone is the center—"

"If it made sense," the senior said, "we would have purchased the correct ticket."

The announcement for the next stop played. Gliden needed to ask them to get off the train with him to take their ticket, and then he'd guide them through buying an appropriate fare. He swallowed.

"Absolutely," the junior one continued. "Why can I buy an incorrect ticket?" Gliden tried to break in and failed. "Your kiosks allow slow methods of payment and don't prioritize the queue."

"Yes," Gliden said.

"Validation is a separate step, and voluntary!" the junior's voice crept up and his agitation seeped through the translation layer. "Anyone can attempt theft of services!"

"Yes," his fellow added. "And then they meet our friend, the Ticket Inspector Gliden." The junior chirped harshly twice.

"We like to regard our openness as a strength," Gliden said, working to keep his voice calm, slow, clear, and reassuring. "As a people, we will follow a just and well-implemented process. Everyone here bought the right ticket." He scanned the car again with a hopeful expression, but found only unfriendly faces looking past him.

"Excepting us."

"And why haven't you done anything?" the senior one demanded.

"I'm trying to explain, so you can avoid this in the future," Gliden said.

"No, no, no, the punishment should force compliance." The car stopped, the doors opened, but no one exited, though Gliden knew this was the stop for many of them, including Monotone Max, who met his dates there. A few got on, glanced about, and flinched as if suppressing the desire to leap back onto the platform. But they stayed, and Gliden looked over with gratitude. "If you wanted people to learn the number of zones and this absurd coding system, then you should have killed us already. Are you a law enforcement officer?"

"In a sense, yes," Gliden said. "Could you—"

"You certainly dress as if you wish to be one," the junior said. He bounced while speaking, jingling his layers of medals. "Do you have lethal compliance gear?"

Gliden felt himself blush and glanced about. The car looked back at him and his cheeks burned, the flush dropping across his neck. "No. Ticket inspectors are unarmed."

"But the detective that wears the suit?"

"They're police," Gliden said. "And I hope eventually I can—"

"—unlikely!" the junior shouted. "You fail to display flexibility and discretion or the determination to enforce the law with due spirit!" He chirped again. "We should be in detention by now. Or severely injured."

"It's not his fault, he's a functionary," the senior one said.

"I'm sorry, but—" Gliden started.

"It is still his responsibility," the junior one said. He hit the seatback with two arms, the trinkets clinking in a wave. The door chimed, the doors closed, and Phillip sighed softly.

"Perhaps at the next stop," Gliden began, but the junior delegate kept on, making a great separating gesture with his arms, and scanning the car of astonished, angry people. He's not reading the cues, Gliden worried.

"Perhaps automation is the answer," the senior burred.

"Take decision-making away from those who can't make them," his underling said. "An implanted chip during travel deducts the fare on a per-station basis. Station and car entry require adequate funds for declared destination."

"You could throttle traffic immediately at any time between any two stations as well."

No one rustled a paper, coughed, and even the train bucked softly against the tracks on its way to Unterstrasse ("exit right, transfer to S-bahn"). Everyone in the car looked at the pair with neutral, tight expressions.

"Why would we do that?" Gliden asked.

The junior officer clicked at him and looked out the window at the rushing blackness of the tunnel. Gliden tried to remember the orientation. Annoyance? Contempt?

"I'm sure that transport theory is an area that our two cultures have much to teach each other about," he said.

"And enforcement," the assistant said, without turning back.

"I think you greatly underestimate the amount of emotional attachment that people have to their transport system," Gliden offered. "It's part of themselves."

"People attempting to travel farther than their accounts allow would be ejected out of the train immediately," the junior muttered.

"Admittedly, I like that idea," Gliden said. "I'm glad we've found some common point. Can we continue this conversation at the next station—"

"Where you'll ticket us for violating your nonsensical zone convention," the senior said. "Take an item," not to him, "zone reform, plus station name and numbering system to go—"

"No," Gliden interrupted. Around the car, people stood up to get better glaring angles, shook their heads, and began to look at each other, gauging their reactions.

"—each station in the world needs a unique alphanumeric designation. Mark the treaty site station as 0. Then each station down becomes -1, -2, each up +1, +2."

"Station names are part of how we identify ourselves," Gliden began.

"There will be a one to one exchange," the junior said. "If you can identify yourself with one arbitrary label then why not another?"

Gliden swallowed. "So Seestrasse becomes AAA plus 5 minus 3?"

They're never going to bite, Gliden thought. Please, step back from the gap. Look around. Gauge the reactions, see how angry we are. Step back, step back, step back . . .

"I can't know as I haven't designed the system yet, much less assigned the final universal indicators." The alien paused. "I doubt they'll be quite that simple, though." He reached up to run his appendage down the banks of medals as a wave of muttering broke across the car.

"We must have geotemporally appropriate station labeling as the basis for any world fare system," his boss said.

"You can't remove the names," Gliden said. "An example! In two stops we'll be at Mohrenstrasse."

"Yes."

"Originally this was Kaiserhof. Berlin started as a Prussian military base, if you've walked around—"

"We've taken the tours," the junior one said. "I did not see a significant stylistic difference."

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Gliden winced. "That's unfortunate. Then the Russians took red marble from the Nazi Reich Chancellery for the walls and renamed it Thalmannplatz, for a communist hero they used to showcase the city's communist roots."

"Why is this—"

"Much later, we learn they had a chance to buy his freedom from a concentration camp but didn't, because he was more useful as a dead icon than a live leader. Then they renamed it Otto-Grotewal-Strasse, for a politician that merged the German communist party with the Soviet one. It was the end of East German independence."

"I've never understood these distinctions between governments," the senior said. "They're so numerous, and they overlap: religious, political, geographical—"

"Yes. Now it's named Mohrenstrasse. Even I don't know why. The Moors conquered Spain," Gliden continued, "but more generally it refers to people with darker skin—"

"—ethnic," the senior one continued. "Yes, ethnic is another category."

"You can't rename the stations," Gliden said. "Each of the stations, the trains, even the zones, they're parts of the history of our city."

"A unique geotemporal designation can be as easily associated—" the junior started.

Everyone in the car except Gliden began to talk directly to the two, incomprehensible but all dissent in angry tones. The junior's voice was lost. Gliden had never seen a car in open rebellion. If you've lost Berlin subway riders on an argument for efficiency and process, that's it, he thought. Get on the next ship home, and take your treaty proposals, some souvenir worthless currency, and your canceled BC two-zone stub.

The car stopped and an expectant silence fell on the assembled passengers.

No one got off, and the people at the platform, seeing the look of the passengers, didn't enter the car either.

"If you could please step onto the platform with me," Gliden said, gesturing out with his ticket book.

"Or, to return to the original topic," the senior one said, taking a gentler tone, "you could display a more nuanced understanding of your job responsibilities."

And the stations could keep their names, Gliden thought. For how long?

"You understand how the system could confuse us," the junior added. "It was an innocent mistake."

"And certainly we could see that your ability to educate and display good judgment would be appropriately rewarded, perhaps with a position where such talents could do more for the public good. Where such a fine suit would be appropriate."

Gliden's pulse quickened.

"Or you could be viewed as an impediment to negotiations," the junior said. Both sets of eyes made a deliberate move toward the red counter clipped to Gliden's lapel.

The doors stayed open. Gliden wondered if the conductor knew. He must.

"I need you to step off the train," Gliden said. "And I'll need to see your issued identification cards."

They waited, and Gliden waited. Then with deliberate, slow movements, the two aliens got up to leave the car. The junior began to chirp into a handheld as he went, one eye on Gliden, who wondered which species would show up first, in which uniform, in support of which side.

And the car, his car, emptied and followed them, twenty Berliners of various stripes pretending they had some transfer or loitering they were eager to attend to. They formed a loose cloud around Gliden and the two aliens, ready to witness but not looking at them directly. Some got on their phones, and some leaned up against the beautiful red marble Mohrenstrasse station sign like bored guards well into their shifts.

Gliden took out a pen and opened his ticket book. ○

OUR CANINE DEFENSE TEAM

At the World Court in Rio de Janeiro,
only the previously domesticated
enhanced canines vigorously leaped to our defense
while the bioengineered coyotes and foxes
yelped and snapped at our ankles without actually biting.
The wolves were ambiguously indifferent, caring little
whether we were convicted or not.

One-third of the enhanced housecats pleaded convincingly
on our behalf, testifying to some extraordinary kindnesses.
Two-thirds, however, pretended we had fallen off the planet
or wished we would.

Roaring their hatred, larger cats wanted us torn into
unrecognizable pieces for our crimes—volunteering for the job.
Enhanced cattle, sheep, and goats graciously
defended our past exploitation and their slaughter
as equitable tradeoffs for our care,
but no other sentient animals took their testimony seriously.

"Once victims, always victims," they agreed.

Birds almost to a feather counseled mercy.

"Yes," they said, "humans have killed billions of us.

But not since the nanoids escaped and made us all sentient,
except for those living in the sea.

And don't many of us now feed on them rather than on each other?"

Our canine defense team jumped and howled enthusiastically.

"Your Honors," the Lead Dog (a Border Collie mix) began, addressing
the six sentient animal judges

(a baboon, seagull, horse, seal, crocodile, and spider),

"humans should be placed on probation,

but the charge of mass biocide and call

for their total elimination is historically blind."

All the animals murmured. We humans wisely stayed mute.

"Without them, where would we all be now?"

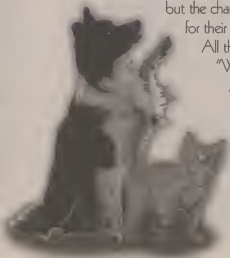
After our near-unanimous acquittal (with the spider abstaining),

we began plotting to regain control of the Earth

by destroying most of the animal sentients,

except for the dogs, birds, and housecats.

We always were fast learners.



—Vincent Miskell

THE SPEED OF DREAMS

Will Ludwigsen

Will Ludwigsen's fiction has appeared in places like *Weird Tales*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and the *Interfictions 2* anthology. He's a 2006 Clarion graduate and a student in the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA program, where he studies under frequent *Asimov's* contributor James Patrick Kelly. He often blogs on literature, society, and applied weirdness at his website, *will-ludwigsen.com*. Will and his partner Aimee Payne live in Jacksonville, Florida, with a real retired racing greyhound named Patti. And, yes, like the dog in this story, she runs in her sleep. Shouldn't we all?

Paige Sumner
8th Grade Science Fair Paper Draft

Introduction

It happens all the time: you're sitting in class, listening the best you can while Mister Waters goes on and on about atoms or sound waves or whatever, when suddenly you fall asleep. Your head lolls against your shoulder and some drool oozes from the side of your mouth. Luckily, Missy Woo kicks you in the knee to wake you up before someone notices, like Mister Waters or—worse—Austin.

What's weird is that in those few minutes of sleeping, you dream hours of stuff. You're all hanging out or playing basketball or walking the mall while everybody else is slowly raising their hands and taking notes. They all get twenty-four hours that day, but *you* get a little extra.

But how much extra?

Investigative Question

How much time can you fit in a dream?

Hypothesis

Time in a dream moves faster than time in real life, so you'll live more there. How much more is proportional to real world time.

Method

Unfortunately, Mister Waters says there's no way to measure time in our dreams. Since the whole idea of my project is that time is subjective, he says nobody could compare or repeat my results in relation to the real world.

That's where Patti comes in.

Patti is our dog, a retired racing greyhound. Her name used to be Patriot back a few years ago when all the bald, sweaty men at the racetrack used to bet on how fast she could run. She had to retire because she was a bumper, so competitive that she'd knock the other dogs in the race against the walls. She never bit them or anything—just shoved them. Like they shouldn't even be in her race, you know? Like they weren't even there.

Even though she's supposedly retired, Patti still likes to run. She's fast for an eight-year-old, too. When she sees squirrels or rabbits in our yard, she peels off after them in a big counter-clockwise circle. I guess habits are hard to break. She caught a bunny once and swallowed it whole, her jaws clapping together as the poor thing slid down her throat. We saw the little eroded bones in her poop.

Patti loves to run so much that she does it in her sleep. After I brush my teeth and crawl into bed, she jumps in too and flops down next to me, sometimes teetering over like a tree and sighing. Then, in the middle of the night, she'll dream about running and kick me awake with her twitching legs. She'll be breathing all heavy, snorting through her nose and sputtering her lips. She usually does it for a few seconds and then goes back to sleep.

Now, it turns out that she used to race down at the Orange Park Kennel Club on their quarter-mile oval. The greyhound rescue people gave us her records, and her specialty was the 5/16ths mile race, which she usually finished in about thirty-two seconds. I know because I added them all together and averaged them.

Lots of dogs run in their sleep, but only greyhounds like Patti probably do it for a fixed length of time, right? She spent her whole life running the same stupid race over and over again, chasing that stick as it swung around the track. If anything is stuck in her head enough to dream about night after night, it'd be that race.

So there's my basis of comparison.

Procedure

I will measure the proportion of dream time-scrunch by doing the following:

1. Let Patti sleep, staying awake to watch her.
2. When her legs start kicking, start the timer.
3. When her legs stop, stop the timer.
4. Write down the number of seconds.
5. Repeat a bunch of times.
6. Get the average time it takes her to run a thirty-two second race in her sleep.
7. Divide that average sleep race time into thirty-two to get a proportion.

Assumptions

Because Mom made me take the dummy version of science this year so I wouldn't get "all stressed" like last year, my assumptions are probably stupid. But then, I'm only thirteen and a girl with "plenty of time to become a swan" as Mom likes to say.

My assumptions, dumb as they probably are:

1. Patti is running a standard race that takes her the usual thirty-two seconds and not some magical fantasy race that she wins in, like, ten seconds.
2. Patti's legs start twitching when the race starts and stop when it stops, and she isn't flying or teleporting for any part of it.
3. The amount of time scrunchable into a dream is always the same proportion. Patti doesn't dream some races faster than others.
4. Dogs and humans have the same time-scrunch proportion.
5. Mister Waters won't be mad when I hand in this project instead of the model of the solar system he signed off on.

Results

Experiment One (February 4, 9:04 PM): When Patti started to twitch, I was trying to get Lisa and Austin back together—I know, stupid—in instant messenger. I couldn't reach the stopwatch in time, so I didn't get any data. I did get them back together, even though Lisa is really only in love with herself like everybody else is.

Experiment Two (February 5, 3:28 AM): Patti started kicking like crazy, waking me up. Luckily, I was sleeping with the stopwatch loop around my wrist and I clicked it right after she started. She huffed and snorted, peeling her lips back from her teeth. Then, after 6.21 seconds, her legs slowed and stopped. I wrote down the time on my algebra book cover and went back to sleep. Now that I'm awake, though, I wonder if I dreamed that she was dreaming, and the stopwatch was just measuring scrunched time in my dream. *Drat!*

Experiment Three (February 6, 7:31 PM): It was my turn to help with Nannah, so I had Patti come in to help. Nannah is my grandmother, and she sleeps even more these days than Patti does and sometimes twitches in her sleep the same way. While I was spooning Nannah's oatmeal between her lips, Patti started kicking under her hospital bed which made Nannah's pills go flying all over. I put down the jar and timed her at 5.2 seconds. Then I timed how long it takes to put down the jar a bunch of times and got an average of two seconds, so that counts as 7.2. It took me forty-five seconds to pick up all the pills, but that has nothing to do with anything.

Experiment Four (February 9, 11:44 PM): Patti kicked for 6.73 seconds. She also yelped, but not an angry yelp—more like a kick ass, "You want a piece of this?" kind of yelp. Nannah must have heard her back in the guest bedroom because she kind of moaned at the same time. Maybe they were running together in their sleep.

Experiment Five (February 11, 11:44 PM): Patti kicked for 6.73 seconds, and it squicked me out a little that she did it at exactly the same time as before.

Experiment Six (February 12, 12:14 PM): Austin came over and we sat on my old swingset waiting for Patti to fall asleep on the grass. When she finally did, he let me take his hand and use his fancy running watch to time her for 6.88 seconds, which means we were holding hands for almost ten seconds. He smelled like soap.

Experiment Seven (February 13, 2:20 AM): Patti and I were under the blanket, reading that note from Austin again with a flashlight. Well, I was reading the note: she's a dog. I'd just gotten to the best part, about him wanting secretly to go with me to the dance but he couldn't break up with Lisa until after she'd finished the basketball season, when Patti started to dream. I clicked the stopwatch and she stopped after 7.1 seconds. Then I read the part about my eyes again.

Experiment Eight (February 14, 5:39 PM): Patti was laying on top of my dress for the dance when she started running again in her sleep, swooshing it underneath her legs. I couldn't stop her because Mom was standing there all blah-blah-blah to me about wearing her makeup. Good thing there was a clock over her shoulder so I could see that Patti wriggled for seven seconds. Mom went on longer, but she stopped when Missy's mom came to drive me and Missy to the dance.

Experiment Nine (February 15, 1:51 AM): I'd fallen asleep in that stupid dress when Patti started dreaming. I grabbed the stupid timer and watched it for the time it took her to finish the stupid race, 6.34 seconds. Which happens to be about the same amount of time that Austin even bothered to look at me at the dance while he was all over Lisa like they were going to be married or something.

Experiment Ten (February 15, 4:57 AM): I was still up, mostly just petting Patti and crying, when she ran her second race of the night. I read somewhere that greyhounds could do eight or more races in a day, so that wasn't surprising. When she finished after 6.2 seconds, I asked her if she won and she looked at me like, "Duh, I always win." That must be nice.

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Conclusions

I added up all the race times and got 60.39 seconds. Then I divided that by the number of dreams (nine) for an average of 6.71 seconds each. Significant digits, blah blah blah: because I only know Patti's real world race time to the ones digit, I've got to round that to seven. So Patti runs a thirty-two second race in her sleep in only seven seconds.

When I divide thirty-two by that, I get the proportion. We get 4.5 seconds of dream time for every second of real time.

Application

Lately I've spent a lot of time talking to Nannah. I sing to her, tell her what happened at school, read her the dumb jokes from *Reader's Digest* she used to like. She never wakes up.

Sometimes she'll kick like Patti does. I asked Dad if she was ever a runner in the Olympics, and he looked at me like I was crazy and told me no. So I have no idea where she's running or for how long. She doesn't lick her teeth like Patti does, so I'm pretty sure she's not chasing anything she plans to eat. Sometimes I bring in flowers so she can pretend she's in a field.

Even if she wasn't in the Olympics, my Nannah did a lot of other things. She was born Flora Soehner on March 6, 1940, back in Pine Falls, Minnesota. She ran away from home when she was about my age, took a train to Hollywood to be a synchronized swimmer in the movies, and met my Grandpa five years later on a trip to San Francisco. They got married a month later. She worked as a waitress, a bartender, a secretary, a census taker, a limousine driver, and even a cop. She went to Mississippi to ride with black people, marched against some war in Washington, and even brought casseroles to hippie kids in Haight Ashbury. She wrote a bunch of poems and songs, a couple of them sung by Jefferson Airplane. I tried to sing them back to her to wake her up but it didn't work.

She showed me how to sew, how to flip an omelet, and how to throw a hatchet into a tree, even though it always took me more tries than her. I wonder if she does that stuff now in dreams, or if she's doing new and different things like piloting a spaceship or being a tigress. Whatever she's doing, she doesn't have much time to tell me what to do better here, that's for sure. If I were a tigress, I'd be too busy, too.

Mom and Dad say she won't live much longer, but they're talking about the real world. Thinking like that, none of us lives very long, right?

But you get 4.5 times as much life sleeping as you do being awake. That's four times the chances to get things right, like the lives Mario gets if you don't make a jump. You can probably even do different things, like be a ballerina in one, the President in another, Laura Ingalls in the next, and a dolphin in the fourth. All while everybody else is just getting one stupid life.

So no wonder Nannah is stretching out her life like lots of old people do at the end. We think it's a coma, but really it's a dream—one where you're doing all sorts of cool stuff you want like winning every race, catching the rabbit, hanging out with Jefferson Airplane, and getting to dance with Austin. Maybe with four times the number of tries, I can do all those cool things too.

Experiment Eleven (February 27, 11:09 PM):

1. Take the rest of Nannah's pills so I can catch up.
2. Write down when I start falling asleep.
3. Live four cooler lives, hanging out with Nannah. If we need money, we'll visit Patti's dreams and bet on her.
4. Wake up and write down all the big courageous things I did. ○

NEXT ISSUE

APRIL/MAY
DOUBLE
ISSUE

Our April/May double issue is “dimensionally transcendental”—bigger on the inside than it appears to be on the outside—and we’re still trying to figure out how we managed to cram three big novellas inside, as well as a host of shorter works and the usual columns. **Pamela Sargent** returns after too long an absence with her heartfelt and melancholy story of a disparate group of adults in a small New England town desperately trying to piece their lives together after a local tragedy—one that may or may not have been caused by a sinister “Mindband”; **Steven Popkes** contributes “Jackie’s-Boy,” a story that will undoubtedly prove to be a year-end favorite for many, as a young man and his intelligent talking-elephant traverse a brutal and frightening post-apocalypse America in search of peace in a world that may never know normalcy again; and talented newcomer **Gregory Norman Bossert**, in his first fiction sale anywhere, describes the trials and travails of a group of scrappy xenarcheologists as they attempt to preserve the mysterious constructions of an alien race before the human bulldozers plow through, in “The Union of Soil and Sky,” featuring a beautiful new cover by **Duncan Long**.

ALSO
IN
APRIL/MAY

Barry B. Longyear returns with an incredibly detailed and compelling account of what might have happened during the last frantic moments of Hitler, deep in his Berlin bunker, surrounded by “Alten Kameraden”; **Sara Genge** revisits the future-world of her recent story, “Shoes-to-Run,” with “Malick Pan,” the boy who refuses to grow up, despite the havoc he may wreak with a few errant nanomachines; **Molly Gloss** presents a tale of the “Unforeseen” that puts health-care debates in perspective: what if it was up to your insurance company to decide if you should be brought back from the dead? **Tim McDaniel** taxes the limits of this Next Issue page with a yarn about a man scientist’s lament, “They Laughed at Me in Vienna, and Again in Prague, and Then in Belfast, and Don’t Forget Hanoi! But I’ll Show Them! I’ll Show Them All, I Tell You!”—you’ll be laughing, too, we promise. **Robert Reed** channels both Hemingway and *On the Beach* with his latest apocalypse drama, “Pretty to Think So”; **Eugene Fischer** makes his *Asimov’s* print debut with the affecting story of a group of near-future refugees stranded in international waters, homeless and “Adrift.”

OUR
EXCITING
FEATURES

Robert Silverberg’s Reflections continues his insightful thoughts about fiction writing in “Showing and Telling II”; **Norman Spinrad** explores various “Third World Worlds” in “On Books”; plus an array of poetry you’re sure to enjoy. Look for our April/May double issue on sale at your newsstand on March 2, 2010. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov’s*—in classy and elegant paper format or those new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We’re also available on *Amazon.com’s* Kindle!

THE TOWER

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's latest novel, *Diving Into the Wreck* (Pyr), is based on her *Asimov's Readers'-Award*-winning novellas: "Diving Into the Wreck" (December 2005) and "The Room of Lost Souls" (April/May 2008). The novel was recently named a Top Pick by the *Romantic Times Book Review*. The author's next book, *Recovering Apollo 8 and Other Stories*, will be out soon from Golden Gryphon. Kris now turns from the deep space of the "Wreck" series and the near space of "Apollo 8" to examine a mystery that is much closer to us in space if not quite in time.

He had gotten a message.

Sent by old-fashioned tradecraft dating from the days of the Secret Intelligence Service, long before the advent of MI6. A simple flowerpot on a balcony in Kensington, a tiny red flag next to the ugliest flower Thomas had ever seen.

The flower didn't matter. The flag did.

It meant: *Be at the designated spot, midnight*. Be prepared.

So Thomas stood on London Bridge, his back to the traffic, his arms resting on the railing. To his left, the lights of Southwark Cathedral. To his right, the Monument designed by Sir Christopher Wren to remind everyone of the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Thomas pretended to contemplate the lights of London reflected on the water. A bit of a wind brushed his cheeks, bringing the slightly bitter scent of the Thames.

Behind him, cars hummed as they glided by. Someone would notice him sooner or later. A man standing on London Bridge at midnight, his arms resting on the edge, looking down at the water, spoke of melancholy at the very least, a potential suicide at the very worst. His hair ruffled as the breeze grew stronger. Then he felt someone at his shoulder and he braced himself so that he couldn't be tossed over. His heart was pounding.

Paranoia, that's all it was. He was here to do a job, not to be killed.

Still, he stepped slightly to his left, just enough to take him out of harm's way.

"Lovely night." The voice was husky, unfamiliar—and surprisingly—female.

Thomas looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She was slight, hair cropped short, rounded cheeks reddened from the chill breeze. Maybe thirty, maybe younger.

"I've seen better." He spoke the coded response, half expecting her to go off script.

After all, it was a lovely night, and strangers occasionally said such things to each other, even at midnight on London Bridge.

"I saw better on New Year's," she said. "The way the fireworks seemed to float through the Eye."

She was his contact, then. Somehow he had always imagined the insider was a man. Middle-aged, disgruntled. Willing to be bought off. Thomas had been watching all of them—those that he could, anyway—wondering who would meet him when the time came.

Odd that he missed a woman. Maybe that's why he had. She seemed shadowy, inconspicuous, perfect for this kind of corporate espionage.

"These days," he said, "fireworks remind me of Guy Fawkes Day when I was a boy."

"Shamie they can't blow up Parliament today." She turned toward him and grinned.

He didn't grin back, but he did check, out of the corner of his eye, to see if anyone approached. Aside from the cars humming behind them, the bridge was empty.

"So?" he asked. "You have a date certain?"

"Two, actually," she said. "The first is Wednesday at five PM. West wall, White Tower. The second is July 1674."

"1674?" he asked. "I don't want that year."

"It's your only hope," she said. "They don't like doing remotes. You're lucky. The researcher is highly regarded, but female. She doesn't dare walk across the Thames. She has to be on location."

He shook his head. "I want 1650, early September 1666, or 9 May 1671. 1674 is too late."

"You've also made your impatience known," she said. "If you want to finish your job in the next year, you'll take 1674. It's the only remote planned."

"They're not doing other remotes?" He certainly wouldn't hear of them. He did work at Portals, just as this woman did, but he had never been assigned to the technical areas. The managers had tested all applicants, and he had failed the mathematical portions. But he had aced the history sections. So he'd spent the past two years in research, finding out tiny things for major historians, and growing more and more impatient.

"They're afraid of remotes. They've only done one, and it was controlled. This is the first uncontrolled remote, and some think it too dangerous."

"Uncontrolled?" he asked.

"Into a site where they don't know each and every detail. They don't even have the government's permission." She was staring at the Thames.

He did too, watching the lights ripple on the inky black water. He could get caught on this end, then, not by Portales, but by the British government. But there were no laws against time travel. Not yet.

"You have to be careful," she said as if reading his thoughts. "This is the first such major experiment. Try not to cock it up."

Cock it up. As if he were part of the corporate team. He didn't care if they never had another remote, so long as he got his treasure.

But he wasn't sure how he would go about it, even with this remote. "What happened in July of 1674?"

The woman didn't answer. Instead, she stared at the Thames for a moment. Then she said, "You're the fake historian. You figure it out. And, by the way, your portal is Neyla Kendrick. Good luck."

His portal. A pun. He hated puns, and was about to tell her when he realized she was walking away from him. The breeze carried her vanilla perfume long after her footsteps faded.

He had been told his contact would arrange the right time period, and make sure he could do his job with a minimum of fuss. Everything would be timed to the second.

He needed it timed. He needed it just so.

He could call it off, he supposed. His client would hire someone else, someone with less caution, someone with a few more balls.

Not that he lacked balls. He'd carried out some of the greatest thefts in living memory. But this one would be the pinnacle of his career—not just in money, but in audacity.

The Crown Jewels.

Not all of them, of course. The most famous ones, as well as the ones still in use, had to remain. But the minor ones, the ones he'd researched, the ones no one had done much more than stare at under glass for hundreds of years—he could take any one of those, and would.

If he decided to do this.

1674. July.

He thought he'd covered all the possible opportunities to steal the jewels in the seventeenth century.

What had he missed?

The thick linen tape actually put pressure on her chest. Neyla Kendrick had trouble drawing a breath.

"That's too tight," she said to McTavish, who was trying to dress her.

The Closet was cold. Rows of clothing, all on racks, all from different time periods, ran off into the distance.

She felt like she was in one of the old warehouses that used to line this part of Southwark after the Second World War. She had to remind herself that beyond the double doors was a modern well-lit hallway.

McTavish tugged at the tape one more time.

"That *hurts*," she said.

He let go and the tape unraveled. She took a deep breath for the first time since he had wrapped the stuff around her. She looked down. Red welts covered the fleshy part of her upper breasts.

"Just get the reduction," McTavish said. "You can have them inflated when you get back."

As if her breasts were balloons. She glared at him.

McTavish had been a dresser, a costumer, and finally a designer for the London Stage. Portals, Inc. had hired him away with an obscene salary, mostly for his knowledge of historical fashion. Not just because he knew how to make someone look like they were from, say, the Middle Ages, but because he could actually pinpoint a year. He could find or make materials that fit so accurately, no native of the time period would think anything was wrong.

McTavish wasn't that careful with his own clothing. He wore the standard long frock coat—this season's current design for the fashionable man—but his was velvet, and too hot. He always smelled faintly of sweat.

"I'm not going to get my breasts reduced," Neyla said. "I'm leaving Wednesday morning."

"It's cosmetic," he said. "It'll be done in less than an hour. You'll have no pain at all. And when you get back—"

"They have to put some substance inside my breasts. It won't be me any more. I like having the original equipment."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "You also want to do your research, right? With those things, no one's going to mistake you for a boy, not unless I wrap all of your torso."

"I won't be bathing," she said, still shuddering at the very idea. She was going back to the land of unwashed flesh, fleas, and bedbugs. That was what she feared the most. The bugs, the dirt, the way she would have to live with it all.

"It'll be July," McTavish said. "Hottest month of the year in any century. You'll already be wearing more clothing than you're accustomed to. The last thing I want is for you to get heatstroke. Another reason not to bind those baps. Get them reduced."

"No," she said. "You're going to flatten them and you're going to make it look natural."

Then she grabbed her pink cotton shirt and pulled it on, leaving her bra on the nearby rack as if she had forgotten it. She wasn't going to wear anything over "those baps." She was going back to work.

"It's not going to look natural," he said.

"Neither are my teeth," she said, "but I'm not having those pulled for verisimilitude either."

Then she stalked out of the Closet.

She was getting angry at McTavish and that wasn't right. He was just a perfectionist, trying to make her the best seventeenth century male she could possibly be. He was trying to protect her.

She appreciated the attempt at protection. But she wasn't going to give up her breasts. She had given up enough for her work. Just moving to London was a sacrifice.

She was a San Francisco girl, born and raised. She loved the cool air, the fog, the modern buildings, and the lack of history. She had gotten all of her degrees at UC-Berkeley, as well as two post-docs, one assistant professorship, followed by a full professorship with summers off and tons of university support to go all over the world to investigate old bones.

She had been about to accept a tenured position when Portals, Inc. contacted her, asking her to submit a proposal for their top-secret project.

Time travel. Controlled, examined. Portals wanted to investigate all kinds of historical avenues before taking its product public. It was a giant form of beta testing. If something went wrong for the historians investigating old myths, virologists investigating ancient diseases, and biologists trying to get DNA from long-vanished species, then Portals would do more testing on its travel system.

Neyla's proposal was simple: It was a redraft of her undergraduate honors thesis, which she had written in conjunction with the History, English, and Anthropology departments. Her thesis was an analysis of the importance of the Princes in the Tower, as told by their bones. Not that she had seen their bones, of course. No one alive had. The bones had been examined only once, in 1933. What then passed for modern science concluded that the bones belonged to two young boys who were the right age to be the princes, and therefore probably were.

That conclusion was enough for the British government. Since then, they hadn't allowed anyone to examine the bones.

She hadn't expected Portals to care about the ancient mystery of the Princes in the Tower, but apparently they had received so many requests from historians and amateur crime buffs, all of whom wanted to solve the mystery themselves (and wanted to spend a year in 1483 and 1484 doing so), that the Portals CEO, Damien Wilder, figured this could be the signature project.

He had been looking for someone who knew how to solve the mystery of the Princes' deaths in a short visit to the past. Neyla's proposal was the shortest—a return to July of 1674, when the skeletons were discovered on the south side of the White Tower. Unfortunately, no one had a date certain, so anyone hoping to find the bodies might have to spend the entire month in 1674—which was a prospect she was now facing.

She stepped inside her office, her heart pounding. She was still angry over McTavish's comment. Not because he had any power to make her go through even minor physical changes for this project, but because he had tapped into her fears about the trip.

So many risks. She had to somehow pose as one of the workers or someone who belonged at the Tower during July of 1674. She and her team would be traveling with only the minimum of supplies, a second set of clothing, and the miniaturized scientific equipment.

She slipped behind her desk. Beyond the large glass windows, London sprawled. The skyline looked nothing like the skyline in 1674. Then the Tower housed some of the largest buildings in the city. Now century-old buildings dwarfed it. Even the creaky London Eye made the Tower look like a hunk of the past stuck in the middle of the present.

She pulled out the box holding the equipment she would take with her. The box was long and thin as if it contained a necklace from Tiffany's. Inside were small items designed to look like things from 1674—a quill pen, a pin, a ring. They all housed something important, from her computer (complete with camera and voice recorder) to the many back-ups she needed.

Everything was solar powered, which helped. Her traveling companions would have redundant equipment, so if someone lost theirs, they wouldn't lose the information.

The entire trip could be summed up in this small box. If she didn't get the right information at the right time in the right way, the trip and all its dangers would be for nothing.

She couldn't quite get over her own audacity.

To travel into one of the world's most heavily guarded places, to a tower still more famous for its prisoners and executions than for its grandeur and its coronations, took a degree of chutzpah that she would never have guessed she had.

Finally she stood and walked to the window. The Thames glittered in the sunlight. Cars flowed over the bridges and through the city, like blood through veins. She was too high to see people walking. From this vantage, though, she could see the entire Tower complex from Traitor's Gate up front to the Jewel House toward the back and the White Tower in the very middle.

Dark and old, foreboding and entrancing, the Tower at this moment was filled with tourists and schoolchildren, people who had paid to "experience" the past.

In two days, she would join them, pretending to be that peculiar kind of tourist who dressed up in period dress to enjoy an historical monument.

In two days, she would stand by the White Tower, and become someone else.

Neyla Kendrick was exactly the kind of person Thomas didn't want to travel with. One of those esoteric scientific types with a narrow specialty who might have to spend an entire month in the past for one moment alone with a pile of bones.

Thomas wanted to get in and get out, quick and dirty. He'd been willing to spend a few days in September of 1666, the Great Fire, just to get the right opportunity. But even his vaguer instructions for the Cromwellian era took into account the fact that the Jewels weren't very important in the Interregnum. Most got sold or lost or stolen.

Thomas had just planned to do a bit of the stealing, in a very short period of time.

Now he had to spend a month with a woman interested in the bones of children. He wasn't even sure what the fuss was about. The Princes had died hundreds of years ago, at a time when England routinely killed its monarchs. It wasn't even accurate to call the boys princes. Technically, one—Edward—was the King of England.

The son of Edward IV, Edward V's only crime was being underage and sickly. His brother Richard was the spare to the heir.

They had come to the Tower voluntarily, to prepare for Edward's reign. His uncle Richard was supposed to be the kid's Protector, the person who managed the kingdom until the boy came of age. But something happened—historical crap no one really cared about any more—and Richard (the uncle, not the spare) decided to take the kingship for himself.

The boys lived for a while after Richard took the throne. And eventually they died—either from sickness or murder most foul. Richard became the infamous Richard the Third, known more for murdering his nephews than for his deeds as king.

Had the boys been allowed to rule, the entire history of the English monarchy might have changed.

But they hadn't been allowed to rule, and there were more than enough murders after them. Henry VIII murdered wives, for heaven's sake. His eldest daughter became known as Bloody Mary for her actions as Queen of England, and his younger daughter, Elizabeth, had been no shrinking violet. Every English monarch of the period killed "pretenders" to the throne, some of whom had more claim to that throne than the person sitting on it. And each death, if prevented, could have changed the course of English history.

So . . . two little boys? Really, who cared?

The biggest problem Thomas had wasn't with Neyla Kendrick or with the long-lost Princes. It was with his own knowledge base. He was going to replace one of Kendrick's assistants.

Thomas knew everything there was to know about the Tower during the Great Fire. He also knew everything he could possibly learn about Thomas Blood, whose attempt to steal the Crown Jewels on 9 May 1671 was one of the more famous thefts in English history.

Thomas even knew which Jewels were lost forever in the Interregnum. He just didn't know what had joined the collection by 1674, what would be missed, and what wouldn't.

With less than two days to find out, he didn't have time to study. This job was becoming a great deal of aggravation. But, he had to remind himself, no amount of aggravation would make him quit.

There was no better target than this one, no better test of his skills.

To commit the crime of a lifetime took an amazing thief.

To commit the crime of several lifetimes took one of the best thieves ever.

He wanted that title for his own.

"He's *what*?" Neyla asked. "He's *sick*? That's not possible. Men like Peter Wilson don't get sick."

The flunky half bowed as Neyla spoke. He was scrawny, with bad teeth, and thinning hair. And he was *young*, twenty-two if he was a day. She had never seen him before, but then she hadn't seen half the people who worked for Portals before. Because he was afraid to give her bad news himself, the head of Travel had sent this poor soul to her. Apparently, the head of Travel had figured out she'd be pissed off.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," the flunky said timidly, "but Dr. Wilson's got pneumonia. He nearly died. One of his lungs collapsed. They've reinflated it and given him some kind of treatment, but he won't be well by tomorrow at five—at least not well enough to trust him alone without medical help in such a primitive time. Ma'am."

"You'd think in this day and age," she said, "no one would ever get that sick."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," the flunky said, "but people still do get ill on occasion."

"But pneumonia? None of us should've gotten that. It's one of those things that can be prevented." She ran a hand through her hair. "This makes no sense. Pete Wilson is

our biologist, our food specialist. He's the one who is supposed to prevent *us* from getting sick. He can't get sick himself, not before we go."

The flunky wisely remained silent.

"I suppose we have to call this off now." She stood, turned her back on the flunky, and went to the window. The Tower looked foreboding in the sunlight.

She half expected to feel relief, but she felt none. She wanted to go, and she wanted to go tomorrow.

"I've been told, ma'am, that no one wants to cancel. They've assigned you someone else."

She frowned. "They've assigned. . . ?"

She had handpicked Pete, just like she had picked the rest of her team. But her contract did give Portals the right to assign people to her team. She had argued about that, and she had lost. Portals wanted the right to send troubleshooters and others on trips to take care of potential problems.

"His name is Thomas Ayliffe," the flunky said, "and—"

"Bullshit." She turned. "They're not sending someone named Thomas Ayliffe to the Tower of London in 1674. They can't be serious."

The flunky's cheeks had turned red. "I'm not in charge—I mean, what's wrong with Thomas Ayliffe?"

"You're clearly not up on your seventeenth century London history," she snapped. "Who assigned this idiot to my team?"

"Mr. Wycroft, at least he's the one who told me—"

She didn't need any more. She pushed past the flunky and stormed to Wycroft's lair.

Wycroft had half of the entire twentieth floor. He had assistants everywhere. He was nominally Neyla's boss, although she really answered to Darien Wilder.

Wycroft's receptionist was an old battle-ax who had been hired away from one of Britain's stuffiest banks. She had been hired for her prim and proper attitude, and her withering looks.

But Neyla could out-wither anyone. She took one look at the battle-ax, and the woman leaned back, ceding the field. Neyla hurried past her, only to be joined by Wycroft's chief assistant, Flynn Martin.

He was short and stocky with a friendly face and dark hair just starting to go gray. People mistook him for an easy-going person, but Neyla knew better. Flynn Martin was the steel inside Wycroft's velvet glove.

"I know you're upset," Flynn said. "But, Neyla, we need this trip to go off tomorrow—"

"I'm not taking any old person along with me because you have a schedule." Neyla kept moving, past desks and fake plants and tasteful copies of sculptures from London's most famous monuments.

"We need to test the remote devices," Flynn said. "We've put a lot of planning into this—"

"So have I," Neyla said, "and I'm not going to let some idiot get in my way and blow my cover on the very first afternoon."

"Neyla, let's talk like adults—"

"Yes, let's," she said. "And since my problem is with Harrison Wycroft, I'll speak to him, not to you."

She slammed both hands against the double doors leading into Wycroft's office. The doors banged open.

Wycroft sat behind his desk, with his back to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The cityscape extended beyond him, almost as if it were a decoration in his office, the London Eye turning lazily to his right.

"Neyla," Wycroft said without saying hello, "he's the only person we have available with at least a passing knowledge of the seventeenth century."

Wycroft was an obese man whose size seemed appropriate, partly because he favored three-piece black bespoke suits, bowler hats, and the ubiquitous black umbrella.

"So postpone the trip until Pete is well," Neyla said.

Wycroft sighed and waved a hand at Flynn. Flynn pulled the doors closed as he stepped back outside.

"Pete, it seems, isn't as cautious as we thought. He was dealing with bacteria from another trip, this one to the fifteenth century, and comparing various disease vectors, somehow infecting himself with a particularly virulent strain of *Pneumocystis carinii*. The problem is that he's ill and in isolation, and we're not going to get him back for weeks, maybe months. Even then he might not be cleared to travel."

She crossed her arms. "How long has he been ill?"

"He's had a cough for a week. It got worse over the weekend."

"And no one thought to warn me?"

"We hoped it wouldn't be serious."

She shook her head. She understood why Pete wasn't going. She even understood the need for haste with this trip: Portals had its various patents to protect, experiments to foster, research and development to promote. She was only one small cog in a very big wheel.

What she didn't understand was how no one seemed to understand that a man named Thomas Ayliffe would be a problem.

"This Thomas Ayliffe is pulling your chain," she said.

"What's wrong with Ayliffe?" Wycroft asked. "Have you had difficulty with him before?"

"What's wrong with him?" she snapped, stepping toward Wycroft. "What's *wrong* with him? You say he's an expert on seventeenth century London."

"The closest that we have on such short notice, yes," Wycroft said.

"If he's an expert," she said, "he's giving you a message. Have you done an identity check on this man?"

Wycroft slid out a drawer. He pressed something—probably one of his private networked computer links—and examined the answer.

"Yes, of course. He went through the same rather difficult vetting system that you did."

"His name is legitimate?" she asked.

"Yes." The answer came from behind her.

Neyla turned. A man stood there. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and as well dressed as Wycroft, only in a suit that wasn't half as conservative. The man had black hair, blue eyes, and ruggedly handsome features.

"I don't believe we've been introduced." His British accent was so posh that he sounded like he belonged at Buckingham Palace. "I'm Thomas Ayliffe."

"And I'm Nellie Bly," she said.

He stared at her with that same withering look that the battle-ax outside had perfected. "You can check my birth records."

"We have," Wycroft said. "Neyla, what's your objection to the man's name?"

"Apparently Ms. Kendrick believes I'm going to use the name when we go to 1674. And that would be unwise." Ayliffe walked into the room, stopping beside her. He smelled of soap, as if he had just stepped out of the shower.

She looked at him sideways. He was significantly taller than she was, which was also a problem. Brits in the seventeenth century, especially working class Brits, were notably short due to poor nutrition and unhealthy environmental conditions.

"You see," Ayliffe said, "Thomas Ayliffe was one of the many names used by the infamous Thomas Blood."

"Why is that a familiar name?" Wycroft asked.

"For god's sake," Neyla said. "Thomas Blood is the most famous person ever to steal the Crown Jewels."

Wycroft stared at her.

"In 1671. He failed, but spectacularly," she said. "He became a folk hero, depending on your political persuasion at the time. Remember, Cromwell was only a few years before, and not everyone believed in the restoration of the monarchy."

Wycroft raised his eyebrows.

"I can't help my family name," Ayliffe said, "but I promise not to use it when we travel. It's not like you need a passport anyway. No one checks your identification."

Neyla glared at him. He didn't even look at her. He directed all of his comments to Wycroft, which she also found irritating.

But she could do the same thing. "He's too tall," she said.

"Both Henry Tudors were over six feet," Ayliffe said.

"Henry the Seventh and his son, Henry the Eighth, were both royalty raised in the best of conditions. Besides, by 1674, they were long dead. No one would remember that they were tall. They would simply remember that Henry the eighth was supremely fat."

She bit her lip, wishing she hadn't said that in front of Wycroft. She made herself continue, partly to cover her gaffe. She now turned toward Ayliffe.

"Even if they did remember how tall the Henries were," she said, "you're going to be posing as some ditch digger who probably never had real meat or fresh vegetables in his entire life. You'll stand out."

"And you won't?" He finally turned to her, then let his gaze run up and down her entire figure.

To her own disgust, she blushed. She wasn't going to defend her appearance.

"According to his file," Wycroft said, "Mr. Ayliffe here used to participate in the Society for Creative Anachronism, so he's not averse to costuming. He works in our history department, specializing in the Elizabethan era, which isn't that much different from the era you'll be traveling in—"

"It's different enough," Neyla snapped.

"But the clothing and customs are close," Wycroft said.

"Close isn't good enough," she said. "We've been working on this for two years. We have a team."

"Pete's not going no matter how you argue it," Wycroft said. "And waiting won't help. We're just going to have to muddle through."

"Let's muddle through without the tall guy," she said. "The rest of us are ready. I don't know what he'll add."

"I do know something about food," Ayliffe said. "I spent a few years at Stratford before I realized that acting wasn't for me, so seventeenth century English isn't that foreign to me. I will probably be able to understand the natives better than you will."

He had a point, although she wasn't going to concede it. Everyone who studied with the Royal Shakespeare Company spent quite a bit of time learning how to speak Elizabethan English, which was still what they were speaking in the 1670s. Her American accent was going to be a handicap. She had planned to speak to the locals as little as possible.

"You will need a translator, right?" Ayliffe asked. "And I didn't see one on your list. I think that might be a lot more valuable than a biologist."

"Pete isn't just a biologist," she said. "He was in charge of food safety."

"If you want safe food, stay here," Ayliffe said. "Back there, you're going to eat things that horrify you because you have no other choice. You'll just have to trust that all those medical precautions they took here at Portals will protect you."

"Nothing will protect against food poisoning," she said.

"Expect a mild case or two," he said. "I've had it. It's not pleasant, but you'll survive."

"In the modern era," she said. "Four hundred years ago, it could kill you."

"But we'll have the remotes," he said. "We'll be able to come back if someone gets deathly ill. Right?"

He directed that last question to Wycroft.

Wycroft's mouth pursed. His eyes shifted to Neyla, then back to Ayliffe. Wycroft looked very uncomfortable.

So no one had briefed Ayliffe on all of the details. Just some of them.

Ayliffe looked from Wycroft to Neyla. "What don't I know?"

"We can return any time in the first three days," she said. "Then we have another window thirty days later. That's it."

"What do you mean, that's it?"

She shrugged. "If we miss the windows, there's a very good chance we'll get stuck back there."

She tried to sound calm about it, but she wasn't calm. She was going to monitor those windows like nothing else, and she was going to return in one of them, no matter what.

"Why?" Ayliffe asked. "You can come back any time. Time travel is time travel is time travel. It doesn't correlate. Even if you leave the past on 30 July 1674, you'll be able to arrive back here one second after you left. What's the problem?"

"It's a design flaw in the remotes," Wycroft said. "Something we haven't been able to solve yet."

"Whatever the remotes do," Neyla said, being as vague as she could be since she'd never really bothered to understand the science, "they work on the initial energy burst for the first three days. Then the system will go dark for a while, recharging, for lack of a better phrase. Our first opportunity to return will be in thirty days."

"Our first," Ayliffe said. "So you won't get stuck."

"We don't know that," she said. "What we do know is that only people who have used the three-day and thirty-day windows have returned. No one else has. I would assume they've tried every thirty days after that. I don't know for certain."

He frowned, then looked at Wycroft. "How do you know this? I thought this is the first major remote trip."

"You think we didn't test the remotes?" Wycroft asked. "We've been testing them for a decade."

"And you're willing to go with this design flaw?" Ayliffe sounded shocked. That pleased Neyla. Maybe he'd back out.

"It's no more dangerous than sending someone back to the seventeenth century," Wycroft said in that tone he used when he was spouting corporate cover-your-assisms. Neyla had heard these arguments before. In fact, she had made some of them.

"So those people who got lost," Ayliffe said, "you haven't sent teams after them?"

"Where would we look?" Wycroft asked. "And what if the problem isn't the remotes? What if they got arrested or something else happened?"

"You don't leave people behind," Ayliffe said.

"They knew the risks," Wycroft said. "So do we. There's a chance that they wanted to stay, you know. Maybe they found true love."

He couldn't hide the sarcasm from his voice. Since Portals went public, the number of movies and novels about people finding love back in time had quadrupled.

"Most likely they died," Neyla said.

Ayliffe looked at her, obviously alarmed.

Neyla added, "If you come with us—and I don't think you should—you're not going on some sanctioned SCA field trip or some little practice holiday for Elizabethan

scholars. You'll be entering a dark, dirty world more dangerous than any third world country. The longer we stay, the less chance we have of surviving."

"So let's get in and out fast," Ayliffe said.

"We can't," she said. "I don't know what day in July they discovered the bodies of the princes. Even if I did know, I'm not sure how fast I'll be able to gain access to them."

"This is," Wycroft said, "our first experiment in a deliberately long trip. We've had accidentally long trips in the past, but not something like this."

Ayliffe visibly swallowed. He looked nervous for the first time since she had met him.

"And," Neyla said, mostly to make him more nervous, "most of those accidentally long trips happened in the time travel booth here in Portals itself. Remotes aren't the only problem with time travel."

Ayliffe studied her. Then he squared his shoulders, and looked at Wycroft.

"I suppose I have to sign waivers," Ayliffe said.

Wycroft looked relieved. For some reason, he seemed to want Ayliffe on this trip. "You'll also have to go to medical and make certain you're both healthy enough for the trip and that you have the right protections."

Ayliffe nodded, then he tipped an imaginary hat to Neyla. "Nice meeting you," he said. "Looks like we'll be spending some time together."

"Not if I can help it," she said.

Thomas left. He hadn't expected this much resistance. He had spent two years building his cover at Portals, making certain his identity was rock-solid and unimpeachable, and his work record perfect.

He hadn't known his allies in the company would deliberately make one of the original team ill, but it made sense. He also hadn't expected anyone to know what his name meant. But then, he had initially planned on traveling back in time alone. He had been opening the door to Wycroft's office when Neyla Kendrick had said *If he's an expert, he's giving you a message*, and he damn near turned around and left.

He'd always used names like Thomas Ayliffe on jobs. A bit of an inside joke, which meant nothing to anyone but him.

But she had seen through it—and accurately. He had sent a small message, one that he hadn't expected to be received until after he left, if he had accomplished his task.

She made him nervous. She was also too pretty to masquerade as a boy. Too pretty and too buxom. He had no idea how the costumers were going to hide those curves, but they had quite a job ahead of them.

Which reminded him. He needed clothes for the journey.

He had a lot to do before five o'clock tomorrow. He hoped he could finish everything in time.

At four o'clock on Wednesday, the team assembled in Neyla's office, dressed in appropriate clothing, all in varying shades of brown. Some of the brown had nothing to do with dye. McTavish had dragged white shirts through mud and dirt and let them dry, then tried to wash them by hand with lye soap. The shirts weren't so much brown as a kind of crap-colored dark tan.

Neyla's breasts had finally been tamed, and the wrapping didn't even hurt. McTavish, working with some of the scientists, had found a mixture of spandex and nanotechnology to squish her breasts. Then McTavish had wound some regular cloth around her belly, so that she looked like a man who had a barrel chest, rather than a pretty boy with man-boobs.

When she looked at herself in the mirror, with her short hair, barrel chest, and spindly legs, she seemed like something out of Hogarth—one of the wide-eyed commoners crowding around his drawing of the crammed streets of London.

The rest of her team looked authentic, too—at least to her. Jeff Renolet, who didn't need wrapping to create his own barrel chest, stood beside her. He was in his forties, balding, with a ruddy face. He normally wore crowns on his front teeth, but Portals' dentist had removed them for this trip. Jeff looked like an old fat man who had been repeatedly punched in the mouth.

Next to Jeff, Benedict Ivance scratched underneath one arm. He had chosen loose-weave linen, which held dirt in every single wrinkle. Modern linen had been treated so that it was soft, but linen without treatment was rough. If he was scratching already, he would be raw by the time this trip was over.

Compared to the others, Dan Sheldon looked like a half-grown boy. He was whip-thin thanks to his daily six-mile runs and his love of urban free climbing. His eyes were clear, his blond hair cut in a bowl-shape. He had the kind of innocent face that often showed up in religious paintings of the era. He could easily exchange his filthy working-man's clothes for priest's robes.

Thomas Ayliffe towered over all of them. His clothing was a bit upscale for a member of the working class, but McTavish had taken care of that by ripping it, mending it, and then ripping it again. Ayliffe looked like an elegant man who had come upon hard times.

Besides, Neyla was beginning to think the man would look good in anything.

She hated that she found him attractive. He was annoying and in the way, and he was noticeable. He was going to scotch this mission just by being part of it. She knew it, and she resented it.

She had done everything she could to get rid of him. She had spent fifteen minutes after Ayliffe left Wycroft's office, trying to convince him to take Ayliffe off the team. When that didn't work, she had gone all the way to Damien Wilder's office, only to be told that Wilder was in Japan, making some kind of presentation.

She was stuck with elegant, good-looking Ayliffe and his ripped upscale clothes.

Her party's cover story was simple. They had joined up on a trip to London to find work. They'd been in the city only a few months and had found just enough to keep them alive.

Theoretically, the story explained their extra clothing, their bundles of supplies, and the fact that none of them looked like the other. Friends and colleagues, not relatives.

They'd had the story drummed into them, practicing it and everything else at odd moments. While, Neyla, the only one without a British accent, had vowed not to speak much, at least around natives, the others had to be careful as well. Jeff had studied seventeenth century speech and Ayliffe knew Elizabethan English, but neither of them had heard it spoken correctly.

They double-checked their equipment one last time. Everyone had their own remote, as well as their own tiny computers. Some had specialized equipment. Ayliffe got custody of Pete's food safety devices, with a short instruction on how to use them. Because Pete wasn't coming along, Neyla insisted on double the amount of water purification tablets even if that meant a little extra bulk in their kits.

When they were done, she looked at the entire group.

"Last chance to back out," she said.

They stared at her. Jeff's right eye had developed a nervous tic. Benedict bit his lower lip, as if he was trying not to say anything, and Dan took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself.

Only Ayliffe looked like a man about to go on an adventure. His eyes were bright, his cheeks slightly flushed.

"All right, then," she said. "Off we go."

* * *

They took a cab to the western entrance, and piled out like the excited tourists they were pretending to be. Neyla gazed up at the massive stone entrance, as impressive now as it had been the first time she had come here. Her stomach did a slight flip, and her breath caught.

Now it all felt real to her.

She followed her little troop through the arches, past the buskers and the tradesmen offering everything from a printout of that day's news to Tower trinkets supposedly for less than they were sold for inside.

Almost no one walked in with her group. What tourists they saw were leaving. The Tower closed to visitors at six, and most people had spent all day here.

The modern gift shop looked garish in front of the Middle Tower. Neyla walked past it to the matching ticket booths. They seemed as out of place as the gift shop, but at least they didn't block the old entrance to one of the towers.

She hurried up to the window, the other members of her team following her.

"Five tickets," she said, broadening her American accent and filling her voice with excitement.

The ticket taker, an elderly woman with a kind face, leaned toward the plastic separating her from Neyla. "Ah, luv, I've got to charge you full price, and you'll only get an hour in there. Come back tomorrow noon latest, and you'll be able to enjoy the whole place."

"I'm flying home tomorrow," Neyla lied, sounding as disappointed as she could.

The ticket taker sighed, as if this were her problem, not Neyla's. "Then you're better off, luv, walking the outside for free, taking pictures and looking at the ravens. It's a lot of money for just an hour, and I don't feel right selling you a ticket."

Just sell me a damn ticket, Neyla wanted to snap. *I'm sure your bosses would appreciate the revenue.*

But she smiled instead. "You're so kind. But my friends here want to see the Crown Jewels, and I want to see where Anne Boleyn got her head cut off."

The ticket taker winced at Neyla's crudeness, but it worked. Playing the demanding American got her exactly what she wanted.

She bought five tickets, then led her little group back to the Middle Tower. The Middle Tower had been an entrance into the entire complex since the beginning of the fourteenth century. It had to have been impressive then, so tall and formidable and new.

Neyla knew the history of each and every building. She knew who built it and why, its various uses, and when it was remodeled, moved, or, in a few cases, destroyed. She carried multiple maps of the entire complex in her head, just in case the remotes worked improperly. The last thing she wanted was to overshoot their historical timeslot and end up inside the wall of a building that had later been torn down—or a moat that had been filled in.

Her group had quite a trek from the Middle Tower down Lanthorn Lane to the Bloody Tower, which would take them to the Inner Ward. Tourists had gone on a prescribed walk ever since the Tower was opened to the public, centuries ago. She knew there were other ways inside the Tower's defenses—she just wasn't allowed to take those ways as a member of the public.

As her team walked, they gawked at their surroundings like proper tourists. The real tourists gawked at them, dressed in their period costume. They received several stares and more than a few people pointed at them.

Neyla tried to ignore them all. She kept her eye on the Bloody Tower, as she had since the first time she had come here. It got its name from the princes. The Bloody Tower was the last place they'd been seen alive, looking out the windows in 1483. Over time, no one saw them any more, and Tudor historians claimed Richard III had murdered them there.

Of course, no one knew exactly what happened to the princes, if indeed they were murdered there or anywhere else. Even if they had died there and the 1933 examination of the bodies was correct, then someone had taken the corpses and carried them across the grounds to the Innermost Ward, where they were buried in the foundation of a spiral staircase.

The bodies had been found in 1674, when workers getting rid of a forebuilding attached to the White Tower dug into the foundation of that staircase. The workers hadn't been surprised.

It wasn't unusual for bodies to be buried all over the Tower's grounds. After all, the place had served as a prison from its very beginnings over a thousand years ago. Many times, unidentified skeletons were discovered throughout the complex; more than once, dozens of bodies were discovered at the same time.

Generally no one cared who the skeletons belonged to. The princes were one of the few exceptions.

The team reached the Bloody Tower, but didn't stop. Neyla didn't look at the windows she usually did and wonder which ones had provided Edward V's last view of the world.

Now the team had entered the Inner Ward, where the Tower's most famous history occurred. Here, on these grounds, Henry VIII had conducted the beheadings of his rivals and wives. Here Elizabeth the First, when she was imprisoned in the Bell Tower by her sister Mary, walked every day with an escort, probably trying not to look at the spot where her mother had died.

"We're nuts," Jeff whispered.

"You want to back out?" she asked him, feeling a surge of disappointment.

He shook his head slowly, as if he were warring with himself. "Just didn't expect it to feel so real, you know?"

She did know. They stopped on the west side of the White Tower, the oldest building in the entire complex. William the Conqueror had built it in 1097 out of gleaming white Caen stone. It had stood alone on the banks of the Thames, a large Norman keep, the tallest building in all of England, twenty-seven meters high.

Neyla looked up all those meters. The Caen stone had held up well. It no longer gleamed, but it still looked white, partly because of the cleanings that it suffered routinely now that preservationists predicted that the filth in the air would eventually cause the stone to decay.

One of the Yeoman Warders—in his regulation Elizabethan black and red garb (tourists called the guards Beefeaters, which made her think of gin)—approached their group. He turned to Ayliffe, as if Ayliffe were their leader.

"You only have about a half hour, lad, if you're going to see anything important. We shut down promptly at six."

"Thanks," Ayliffe said. "We're nearly done."

The Warder nodded, then wandered away, probably to give his warning to the other remaining tourists.

"We'd better act fast," Dan said.

"We're going to take our time," Neyla said. Going too fast might cause mistakes. The first—and most important—thing they had to do was find the right spot on the ground outside the White Tower.

The grass had been cordoned off—too many feet would cause the stuff to stop growing—but the grass not too far from the northwest corner of the White Tower was exactly where they wanted to stand. They couldn't get anywhere near that demolished forebuilding, since no one knew exactly how big it had been.

Benedict watched the Warders. He would give the team the all clear when they could run for the grass. The rest of the team pulled out their remotes.

The remotes were thin disks that looked like badly crafted circles that hung from a chain. Only, right now, no one in the group wore theirs. They were instead squeezing the disks' sides to turn them on.

The technical team had already programmed in the date and time. No one on Neyla's team knew how to program these things, even though she'd begged for the chance to learn for the past two years.

She wanted to control when she returned. But she was told that the remotes were so delicate that one mistake could send her into a different time period, and strand her there forever.

She wasn't sure she believed it. Portals was a corporation, after all, and divisions in corporations did their very best to hoard knowledge so that they could hoard power. But she hadn't won that argument, either.

When her device was finally on, she took Benedict's and started it. Then she and the team waited while he watched.

Finally, he nodded. The group hurried to their spot on the grass, and when Neyla gave the signal, pressed the center of the disks, activating the travel mechanism.

She clutched her disk so hard she was afraid she was going to break it. At first, nothing happened. She glanced over at the Bloody Tower, saw a Warder running toward them, and then he simply faded away.

Everything went completely black. A wind buffeted her, changing direction constantly. Thunder clapped—or maybe she was hearing sonic booms—and the air grew hotter, then colder, then hotter again.

For a moment, she felt like she was falling, and then she realized she really was falling. She landed in a heap on the hard ground, the wind gone, the air warm and fetid.

She blinked hard, realized the darkness wasn't quite absolute. A moon shone above her and the stars surrounded it.

She'd never been able to see the stars in London before.

"Anyone else here?" she asked quietly.

She sat up, stretched her limbs, and realized that while she didn't have any broken bones, she would be badly bruised.

Her heart was pounding.

"I'm here," Dan said, his voice as soft as hers. "Hit my head pretty hard."

Her eyes were adjusting. She could see the outlines of the White Tower now, and thought she might see a dim light through one of the windows. A dim, flickering light. A lantern, perhaps, or a candle.

"You all right?" she asked.

"I think so," he said.

She moved toward his voice. She craved real light—a flashlight, a small phone/computer display, something. She hadn't planned on the darkness. It felt like a live thing. A close, smelly live thing. Her eyes burned. The air was filled with smoke. She hadn't expected that, either.

"Anyone else here?" she asked as she groped for Dan. Finally her hand found wool.

"Ouch," he said and pulled away. "I banged myself something awful."

"Me, too," she said.

"God. They said we'd fall. They didn't say it would be so far." That voice belonged to Benedict. "You'd think they could calculate how much dirt and fill and stuff accumulated over the centuries."

Neyla sighed in relief at hearing his voice.

"Are you all right?" she asked Benedict.

"Banged up, just like Dan, but nothing serious."

"They said we'd fall only a few decimeters. Did that seem like a few decimeters to anyone? Seemed like at least a meter to me," Dan said.

Neyla had no idea. The fall was expected but hard. She was beginning to worry that Jeff and Ayliffe were too badly injured to speak.

"Experts don't know everything." That was Jeff. He'd half mumbled it. "I don't think they considered the tiny details. After all, they weren't the ones traveling in time."

Neyla was relieved to hear his voice. "Any broken bones, Jeff?"

"Twisted my ankle, but I can put weight on it. I'll be all right."

All the voices were close to her. She let out a sigh. "What about you, Thomas? You okay?"

Silence. She heard her own breath, a little ragged as it went in and out. Beside her, fabric rustled. Then someone's joint made a cracking noise.

"Thomas?" Why would Ayliffe pretend to be hurt? Why wouldn't he answer? "Feel around for him, guys. Maybe he got knocked unconscious."

She kept her voice down as she spoke. She didn't know if guards patrolled the grounds.

Clearly, her team had arrived at night. Which was good on one level—she would be able to see how far the work had progressed, maybe even find the bodies herself—and bad on another. She would have to figure out what to do with her team before dawn, whether or not they would leave the complex or find a place to sleep somewhere nearby, somewhere that they wouldn't get caught.

"I'm not finding him," Jeff said.

"Me, either," Benedict said.

"Hey, Thomas!" Dan raised his voice slightly.

Neyla's eyes were adjusting to the darkness. She made out the shapes around her. The three men, Benedict slightly prone, Dan sitting up, and Jeff, on his hands and knees groping for Ayliffe. The White Tower in front of her. An amazing expanse of ground behind her.

The Grand Storehouse hadn't been built yet nor converted to the Waterloo Barracks. She could see what had been, in Henry III's time, the outer wall, extending all around her. As she turned, she thought she saw movement.

She squinted.

Someone was running silently across the grounds.

Away from her.

"Crap," she said and stood up. "Is that Thomas?"

She pointed toward the shadowy figure.

"It's got to be a guard," Dan said, sounding slightly panicked.

"He's not running toward us," Jeff said.

"Maybe he's getting help," Benedict said.

"No, he's not." Neyla stood and wobbled just a little. Her muscles felt like they'd been stretched and turned inside out. "It's Thomas."

"Why would he run?" Jeff asked.

"He's probably disoriented," Dan said.

"He's not that either," she said.

She should have trusted her instincts. Thomas Ayliffe aka Thomas Blood.

The damned idiot *had* been sending a message.

And she was finally, *finally* receiving it.

Thomas had fallen hard on his tailbone, knocking the wind out of him. He had lain for a moment on the cool grass.

He had expected the air to stink, but not something this foul. It was as if he had landed inside a dumpster filled with raw meat on a hot summer evening. While he tried to catch his breath, he willed his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The darkness was great luck. He could get to Martin Tower, where the Jewels were kept in the seventeenth century, with a minimum of fuss, so long as he stayed away from any guards. Then he could take the Jewels, come back somewhere near here, and press his damn remote, all within his three-day window.

Hell, if he did it fast enough, he would be inside a three-hour window.

Provided he could stand.

The fall had hurt. He had probably landed on some of the things he'd squirreled inside his linen shirt. He'd brought a paste copy of one of the rings he wanted, as well as some keys and a few small weapons. Tools of the trade, which had probably added to his bruises.

Neyla's voice, sounding musical, American, and out of place, asked if everyone was all right. Thomas got onto his hands and knees, stifling a moan as he bent his back.

He crawled along the grass, his fingers finding mud—or something worse. He didn't want to look up. He had no idea how the sewer system worked in the Tower. Did people have privies here? Where did they dump the chamber pots?

He shuddered so deeply that he almost moaned again, but the thought was enough to get him to his feet.

Once on his feet, he could see the outline of the thirteenth century wall. Martin Tower stood on the upper northeast corner, and he could see it vaguely.

He felt disoriented. Knowing that buildings wouldn't be here—the museum for one, the Jewel House for another, Waterloo Barracks for a third—wasn't the same as seeing the grounds without them.

It looked like a completely different place.

It was a completely different place.

He brushed his hands on his knee breeches, grabbed his small bundle of supplies, and started to run as silently as he could.

He headed up the path toward Martin Tower, ignoring the pain that ran up his spine. His whole body hurt, but he was trying to convince himself that it was the kind of hurt a man got when he had the wind knocked out of him, not when he was seriously injured.

He had to remember the plan.

There would be guards. He had read somewhere, in one of the contemporaneous accounts, that the guards around the Jewels had doubled after Thomas Blood's failed attempt in 1671. Which was just three years ago now. Weird.

He had to take out the guards. Break into the Jewel cupboard, and take his items. If he was really lucky, he would get away completely. Neyla would think he somehow never made it to 1674, and she would go on with her mission without him. He would complete his theft and be on his way. With things more precious than gold.

Neyla was running before she even realized what she was doing. She wasn't going to let that arrogant bastard ruin her trip.

She heard one of the men behind her call her name and another shush him. Then she heard footsteps, also from behind her, and hoped it was her team running with her.

She sprinted after Ayliffe. He was too far ahead for her to catch him, but that didn't matter. Once he reached Martin Tower, he wouldn't be able to get in. It was locked, and the guards had been doubled in the past three years. He probably didn't know that.

Her breath was coming in small gasps. Her throat tickled. The foul air made her want to cough.

So far, no guards, but that would change. Didn't they hear the commotion in the yard? Weren't they trained to come running?

But she hadn't been able to find out how many guards were on duty in July 1674. Even if she had, it wouldn't have mattered. Corruption was so deep in the Tower that just because someone was supposed to work there, didn't mean that he would actually show up.

She couldn't see Ayliffe any longer. He had to have reached Martin Tower.

Her breath came hard and suddenly she couldn't catch it at all. She wheezed and doubled over, coughing so hard that it hurt. Something was getting to her.

Lack of oxygen. The odors. The smoke.

Something.

Her eyes watered, but she made herself stagger forward. She had to catch him, before he doomed them all.

Main doors were locked, just like he expected. The locks were built into the iron doorframe, just like the old diagrams had shown.

He made himself take deep breaths of the thick air. He needed to slow down his heart rate and remain calm.

Then he reached inside his jacket, lifted the edges of his linen shirt, and felt around until he found the two tools he would need right now. The skeleton key, which he had been told was universal, and a tiny stun gun, one that didn't shoot its barbs over a distance. Instead, its business end sent an up-close-and-personal charge through the victim that they wouldn't soon forget.

His hands were shaking. He willed himself to settle down.

He could hear footsteps along the path, then wheezing and loud coughing. He couldn't tell if the cougher was male or female.

Someone wasn't taking well to the seventeenth century air.

He gripped the skeleton key tightly in his right hand, steeled himself, and stepped in front of the door. He shoved the key into the lock, and turned. For a moment, he thought it wasn't going to work. Then he heard an audible click.

"There is a God," he whispered. Or at least, a spirit of some kind, watching over him, helping him succeed.

Neyla heard a door creak open. How could the guards be missing this?

What if they weren't?

Dan and Jeff had joined her. She looked over her shoulder. Benedict was only a few yards behind them. He appeared to be running backward, keeping an eye out to protect them from potential trouble.

She reached the exterior of Martin Tower just as the door creaked closed. Something clicked.

She grabbed the handle and pulled. The door was shut tight. Locked. The bastard had shut them out.

Dan caught up to her. He was breathing as hard as she had been.

He tugged on the door, just like she had, and he couldn't get it open either.

"Now what the hell do we do?" she asked.

He grinned at her, then he looked at the windows on the second story. "We climb," he said.

A lantern burned low just inside the door. A guard, sitting on a wooden chair, snapped awake as Thomas turned the skeleton key in the lock.

Thomas started. The guard was wearing the red-and-black Beefeater uniform. Only his was dirty and rumpled.

Thomas made himself take a deep, calming breath. Of course the man wore a Beefeater's uniform. The uniform had been designed in the Tudor era.

The guard spoke. For a moment, it sounded like gibberish. Then Thomas concentrated, like he used to do at the beginning of any Shakespeare play, and the words filtered through his brain.

The man had cursed. His accent was thicker than Thomas had expected, the emphasis on different parts of the words than Thomas had learned. But they were familiar enough.

The guard stood. He was half a foot shorter than Thomas, and had gone to fat. He smelled of grease and onions and unwashed flesh.

Thomas's eyes watered. He wondered if he would ever get used to the stinks around here.

"March away," the guard snapped. "Your place is not here."

"Oh, I belong here," Thomas said and pressed his stun gun against the guard's side.

The man burbled, then convulsed, falling backward to the ground, his head hitting the stone floor repeatedly, sounding like some kind of drum.

Thomas watched for just a moment, making sure the man wasn't having some kind of seizure. The last thing Thomas wanted to do was kill someone.

The guard's face was red, but he seemed okay. He moaned and stopped convulsing. He was breathing, but he wasn't getting up.

Thomas couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed the lantern off its peg, and hurried down the corridor to the left, hoping against hope that the Jewels were where they were supposed to be.

Neyla was still having trouble catching her breath. She looked up. She had free climbed in her training for this mission—part of time travel was getting in the best physical shape possible. But the free climbing she had done had been on fake rock walls in gyms, not on the side of an old stone building.

Benedict caught up to them. "We going in?"

"I am." Dan took a few more steps back, and surveyed the side of the building. "I should be able to let you in shortly after I get inside."

"If you don't get caught," Benedict said.

"O, ye of little faith," Dan said. He gripped the side of the building, then found footholds. "This thing isn't smooth. It shouldn't take me long."

Neyla was glad he didn't ask her to come along. He had asked her to urban free climb back when they were training. She had taken one look at the building that he had chosen in Canary Wharf and immediately declined to go any farther. She had realized that afternoon that she had a very mild fear of heights.

He scaled the side of the building like Spider-Man dressed for a Shakespeare play and reached the window in no time at all.

Neyla hadn't even realized she was holding her breath.

He braced himself, then reached into his jacket and removed the knife he'd brought with him.

For a moment, Neyla thought he was going to pry the window open. Instead, he used the hilt to smash the glass.

Shards rained down on them. Jeff cursed. Benedict bent over.

Neyla was standing far enough away that she didn't get hit.

"You could've warned us," Jeff said.

She shushed him. They were already making too much noise. She turned and looked at the Inner Ward.

She wasn't sure what she was expecting—exterior security lights to go on? If someone lit a candle a few buildings away, she wouldn't be able to see it.

She turned back toward the building. Dan had disappeared inside.

Now all they had to do was wait.

The corridors were narrow and winding, and they smelled of tallow. Thomas kept the lantern in front of him, but it didn't give off much light. Inside the lantern's glass, four candles were carefully braced, but only one had been lit.

The stairs appeared so swiftly that he almost tripped down the first. The stone walls saved him. The walls around the stairs were so narrow that they caught him even as he pitched slightly forward.

His breathing was ragged. He put one hand on the stone wall, wincing at the dampness, and went down.

He would only get one shot at this, especially now that Neyla knew he had no reason to participate in their little bone expedition.

He was glad he wouldn't have to stay here long. He hadn't expected the past to be so creepy.

He followed the twisting staircase down and relaxed slightly when he saw that it opened into a large arched room.

The cupboard was in just such a room—he'd seen someone's portrait of that. He hoped that the ancient art was accurate.

Funny, he had thought it would be easier to break into the Tower without the high level security, the cameras, the motion sensors, the laser traps. But he had never been so terrified on a job in his entire life.

He walked forward into the darkness, holding the lantern in front of him, and wishing it gave off more light.

Neyla shifted back and forth on her feet. She had shushed Jeff and Benedict more than once, and then they had stopped talking altogether when a man appeared on the west side of the White Tower, slowly walking the Inner Ward. He held a torch in one hand, but he didn't appear to be looking for anything. It took Neyla a few minutes to realize what he was doing.

He was patrolling the grounds.

She pressed what remained of her little team against the door, and pointed. They nodded. They huddled together as the man walked within a few yards of them, not noticing the broken glass or the three people a stone's throw away.

She hoped he would be gone by the time Dan got the door open. *If* Dan got the door open. She didn't know what would happen if he didn't.

The air down here smelled rank, almost as if the polluted Thames had flowed inside once and no one had bothered to clean it out. The walls and the floor looked clean enough—or clear enough, anyway, since there wasn't any furniture around him.

Thomas held up the lantern, hoping he wasn't hopelessly lost. Then something glinted in front of him. His breath caught. He was here. Finally.

The guard and his torch disappeared around the front of the White Tower. Neyla let out a sigh of relief. She stepped away from the door just as something clanged inside.

Then the door creaked open and a thin ray of light trickled out.

"Come on." Dan's shadowy head peered out.

Jeff slid in first, followed by Benedict. Neyla entered last, pulling the heavy door closed behind her.

They were in a small antechamber of some kind. Dan had found an old-fashioned lantern, made of iron and glass, designed to protect candles from gusts of wind. The

smoke from the candle wisped out of the top, near the metal ring that Dan was holding.

He nodded toward the center of the room. A guard lay flat on his back, his eyes partly open.

"Is he dead?" Jeff asked.

"Dunno," Dan said. "Thought I'd let you in first."

Neyla clenched her fist, then made herself release it, finger by finger. Dammit, dammit, dammit.

Benedict hurried over to the guard and felt his carotid artery for a pulse. After a moment, he said, "He's all right."

That was some consolation, at least. But now, no matter what, they would have to leave. They couldn't show up on the grounds the day a guard was attacked in Martin Tower.

The last thing she wanted was to get caught. Not here. In the seventeenth century, prisons were foul places, filled with wretched people, particularly the people who weren't wealthy and couldn't pay for their own upkeep.

"What did Thomas do to him?" Jeff asked Benedict.

"Can't tell," he said. "Doesn't look like he was stabbed. Probably hit him over the head."

"Doesn't matter," Neyla said. "We have to find Thomas and get the hell out of here."

"Out of Martin Tower?" Dan asked.

"Out of 1674," she said. "You want to be arrested here?"

"Jesus," he said. "No."

"Where are the Jewels?" Benedict asked.

She had to stop and think. She'd never studied much about Martin Tower. She knew the history, of course. The Jewels were locked in a ground-floor cupboard, beneath the apartments of the Deputy Keeper of the Jewel House.

She had seen drawings of Blood's incredible heist, the one he had nearly gotten away with, and they always portrayed the cupboard as a large space, somewhere nearby.

But to get there directly? She had no idea.

"Was there an apartment upstairs?" she asked Dan.

"There were doors," he said. "I came in a corridor. The lantern was hanging near them. I had to use one of my matches to light it. I hope that's okay."

She didn't care that he had brought illegal matches or that he had lit the lantern. But the fact that it hung near a door not too far from the window meant that the apartments were on the west side of the building.

"We go this way," she said and headed to her left.

The light had reflected off a metal padlock someone had hung through the handles of a cupboard. The only cupboard that Thomas knew about was the Jewel cupboard. This had to be it.

His heart was pounding so hard that for a moment, he thought someone was coming after him.

He took a deep breath. He would worry about that if it happened. Right now, he needed some jewelry.

He studied the cupboard. The handles were locked shut with the padlock and the padlock was too small for his skeleton key. But the cupboard doors themselves were hinged.

He hadn't brought a metal file, but he did have a few other tools. He could get the tiny nails out of the hinges and pull them off the door. Then the door would open from the side.

It wouldn't take long at all.

He looked around for a place to hang the lantern, found one not two feet away. He stopped, set down his bundle, then removed the candle and used it to light the other three. He replaced them and hung the lantern.

He stepped toward the cupboard and reached for the closest hinge. His hands were shaking. He had never been so nervous on a job. He had never done a job as complicated as this.

Thomas forced himself to relax, and slowly, carefully, pried the tiny handcrafted nails out of their hinge.

They had gone through a very twisty corridor that seemed to go nowhere.

Neyla was beginning to doubt herself. She usually double-checked things in her research materials or with her computer, but she didn't have fingertip access any more. She missed it.

She would have missed the stairs too, except that the corridor led right to them. The branch to the right, going away from the stairs, almost seemed like an afterthought.

Dan started going down the branch, but she grabbed his arm and shook her head.

Her memory said the Jewels were on the ground floor, but she wasn't sure how they defined ground floor here. Had her team come in on the ground floor or was there one level down, accessible from another part of the building?

It made more sense for the Jewel cupboard to be as far beneath ground as possible. That way it would be easier to defend.

She started down the stairs.

"I don't think so," Dan whispered. "I think they're on this floor."

"You take Benedict and look," she said. "But first, give us each a candle."

"They're not in holders," he said. "The wax'll burn your fingers."

"I don't care," she said. "I don't see well in the dark."

They stopped. He fumbled with the lantern, handing her and Jeff a candle each. Then he closed the glass door and picked up the lantern.

Benedict watched the whole thing as if it were a waste of time.

"If you don't find anything," Neyla said, "come back here. We'll be waiting."

At least, she hoped they would be waiting. She wasn't sure what they would find below. If they did find Thomas, she was going to have to find a way to subdue him. After all, he had nearly murdered someone.

She and Jeff went down the stairs slowly. The stone walls along the side were narrow, cramping her. They were damp and the air had a mildewy odor that mixed with the ripeness of stagnant water.

She resisted the urge to sneeze. Something in this time period really bothered her. She hadn't realized she had allergies until she'd arrived. Still, she made herself move down the stairs as quietly as she could.

When she reached the bottom she saw a series of arches that she recognized from the old paintings. She was on the right path. She wished she could yell for Dan and Benedict, but she didn't dare.

Instead, she put a finger to her lips. Jeff nodded. Together they walked through the arches, going slowly, hoping that Thomas wasn't planning to ambush them.

The wood was groaning, the metal scraping. Who knew seventeenth century craftsmanship was so damn good?

Thomas took out his knife and dug into the wood itself. Screw the nails. The wood was the softest part of this damn cupboard. And he was going to get in no matter what.

He was making a god-awful noise. He hoped no one heard it from the apartments

above. He knew from the Thomas Blood stories that one of the men in charge of the Jewels—the Keeper of the Jewel House? His deputy?—housed his entire family in Martin Tower.

It had been that family that had caught Thomas Blood. The son had inopportune-ly returned from his military service after years away, and caught Thomas Blood's gang in the act of theft. The gang managed to escape, but the son raised an alarm and the guards caught them in the streets just outside the Tower.

Thomas had vowed to himself that he wouldn't get caught. So far, he seemed to be doing well. Even if he had to gouge the damn hinges free.

Pounding, cursing, clanging.

Neyla glanced at Jeff, then pointed toward the sound. Two arches away, she could see a soft yellow glow.

Jeff nodded. Then he reached up and pinched his candle out. Neyla did the same.

They pressed against each other, walking toward the noise. It had to be Thomas. She hoped.

Finally, he got the damn thing open. He pulled away an entire door, leaving it hanging from the padlock.

To his surprise, the Jewels weren't sitting on rests or in small holders. They were crammed haphazardly on shelves, looking like nothing more than some very wealthy person's high-end jewelry closet.

He stared for a moment.

He'd seen such riches before. After all, he had seen the Crown Jewels—these Crown Jewels—in their modern display, under reinforced glass with sensors all around, cameras on each jewel, special lighting, and an appropriate setting for each, showing off its sparkling magnificence.

There was no sparkling here, not even when the light caught the diamonds and sapphires and rubies. These things hadn't been cleaned in a generation.

The orb sat to one side. St. Edward's crown, restored after Thomas Blood had crushed it to get it out of the Tower, sat near the back. Thomas couldn't see the Scepter, not that it mattered.

But he didn't want them. He wanted Edward the Confessor's sapphire ring.

He had an exquisite paste copy tied under his shirt. Or at least what he and the forger thought was a copy. No one knew exactly what the sapphire ring looked like. It had been melted down, the sapphire placed in the Imperial Crown in 1837 for the coronation of Queen Victoria. All they had to go on were paintings from the National Portrait Gallery, and some of those lacked so much in detail that he prayed he had it right.

Now he realized it didn't matter. The ring was probably as filthy as the rest of the jewelry, and no one knew if there was filigree work or any engravings or anything that made the ring unique.

He should have thought of that. People didn't clean *themselves* in this century. Why would they clean their jewelry?

He went through the cupboard as quickly as he could, searching for the ring. Each time he found a small piece he could pocket, he moved it to one side. He would take a lot of lesser jewels out of here, things thought sold off to fund wars or lost to the sands of time.

Maybe lost to a traveler in time.

He grinned to himself.

Then he found Edward the Confessor's ring. Thick and well made and surprising-ly heavy.

Thomas reached into his own shirt and untied the fake ring. It gleamed compared to the actual treasures.

He tied the real ring inside his shirt, put the fake with the Scepter, and then looked at the others, trying to figure out how to carry them. He had found five pieces small enough to carry without causing too much trouble.

Counting the ring—which his sponsor saw as the real prize—Thomas would have six pieces. Five for his sponsor (in exchange for Thomas's fee) and one for himself, a keepsake of an extraordinary moment.

But he wasn't done yet. He would put the other five pieces inside the bundle. He crouched, untied it, and spread it on the floor. Something rustled near him. A rat? A guard?

He looked up—
And saw Neyla.

He had jewels. He had come to steal the Jewels, and, smart bastard that he was, he'd taken five smaller, lesser-known pieces.

Her gaze met his. He smiled.

"I figure no one will miss these," he said.

"They'd miss the guard," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "I just stunned him."

"Lucky for you he's not dead," she said.

"I don't think that's lucky. He can identify me. I'm finishing up and getting out of here."

Her mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. Didn't he understand the implications of all of this? Didn't he realize that he had just ruined her trip? That he might get them all killed? Or maybe worse—imprisoned here, in the seventeenth century?

She shook with fury. "Put those things back."

He smiled again. "And do all this for nothing?"

She launched herself at him.

He tried to duck, but he couldn't, since she had already found him in a half crouch.

She hit him like a linebacker, and knocked him on his already injured tailbone. Pain swept through him, harsh and unrelenting. He couldn't catch his breath.

She grabbed him by the jaw, fingers behind his ears, and slammed his head against the hard stone floor. Once. Twice. Three times.

He twisted, pain searing through him from his back, then his head, then his back. He wrapped his hands around her wrists and tried to pull her off.

He should buck, but he couldn't get his legs underneath him. They were bent at an angle and he couldn't get purchase.

She was going to kill him. This attractive, monomaniacal bone researcher was so mad she was going to slam him to death.

He tried to gasp out an apology, but he couldn't think clearly enough to put the words together.

He wasn't sure how to stop her. He wasn't sure if he could.

Hands gripped her shoulders, pulling her off.

"You're going to kill him."

Jeff had yanked her back. He was holding her.

Sweat ran down her face. She was coughing slightly. She had been gripping Thomas's jaw, her fingers digging so hard into his skin that her hands hurt. Thomas was still on the ground, looking dazed.

If she said she hadn't meant to hurt him, she'd be lying. She had never been so angry in her life. He had hurt an innocent man, ruined years of her work, and threatened all of their lives here in a dangerous past, and he had joked about it.

Joked. Like it was all one big lark.

She was breathing hard. Then she moved toward him again, but Jeff grabbed her. "No," he said.

"I'm not going to kill him," she said.

Instead, she dumped out the bundle, then ripped the linen in half.

Thomas had raised one hand to his forehead, and he was moaning. Either she had injured him badly or he figured she wasn't going to attack him any longer.

She handed the ripped cloth to Jeff. Then she grabbed Thomas's hands and pulled them together.

"Tie him as tightly as you can," she said.

Jeff blinked at her.

"Do it!" she snapped. She wasn't sure how long she could hold Thomas.

Jeff tied the linen around Thomas's wrists so tightly that she could see the fabric digging into his skin.

"Now what do we do with him?" Jeff asked.

"Give me a minute," she said, "and I'll figure it out."

For a moment, Thomas thought he was vindicated. Even though his head hurt so badly he could barely move and the pain in his spine traveled all the way through his legs, he figured he would survive this.

When the guards or whoever found him and untied him, he would twist away, grab his little remote and vanish.

He would be gambling that this room would still be in Martin Tower in the future, but it was a small gamble. They usually didn't change the configuration of an existing tower.

Besides, anything would be better than staying here.

Neyla picked up the Jewels and put them back. Then she stood up, putting one hand on her own spine.

In the other hand, she held his knife.

Thomas's eyes widened. He clearly thought she was going to kill him.

She wasn't going to kill him. She wasn't that kind of woman. She wasn't even going to damage his handsome mocking face, although she was still tempted.

He had no idea how much work he was going to cause her. Somehow she had to drag him out of here. And then they were going to have to deal with him in the future.

She had no idea what would come of that.

But first, she had to make everything right.

She handed the knife to Jeff. Then she untied her own bundle, added Thomas's things to it as she looked for the unauthorized tools he had brought along. Something had gotten him into this building, and he had used something to hurt that guard.

She didn't see anything that would fit those descriptions in his bundle. Which meant they were on him.

Smart. He might have had to leave the bundle behind. He clearly planned ahead. She opened his jacket, then ripped open his shirt. The disk rested against his chest. But that wasn't what caught her attention.

What caught her attention was everything he had smuggled in. Skeleton key, extra knife, stun gun, and a dark, dingy ring.

She grabbed the ring.

It was heavy, ugly, and old. She rubbed her finger across it, removing layers of dirt. A gigantic sapphire gleamed up at her.

Edward the Confessor's ring.

But she had seen it in the cupboard.

Gleaming prettily, because it came from the twenty-first century, polished and shiny. Not because it belonged here.

Because it was paste.

"You son of a bitch," she said. She turned to the cupboard, grabbed the fake ring, and put the original back.

Then she bent over and grabbed the remote, holding it in her hand.

Thomas looked frightened for the first time. "Don't," he said.

"You think I'm going to leave you here?" she asked.

"You can't," Jeff said. "He doesn't fit."

"Don't take that," Thomas said. He wasn't quite begging. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to beg. She didn't want to see him lose all of his dignity.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't," she said.

His eyes moved back and forth, as he clearly thought of several options and discarded them. Finally, he said, "You'd be sentencing me to death. You're not that kind of woman."

"Sentencing you to death," she mused. "Here, in the Tower of London."

His cheeks flushed a dark red. She could feel the fear coming off him in waves. He actually believed she might leave him.

Instead, she let the remote fall back onto his chest.

"Come here, Jeff," she said. "We're going to have to carry him out."

"I can walk," Thomas said.

"So get up," she said.

He rocked, moaned, and was about to work his way up when Jeff grabbed an arm, yanking him to his feet.

"We're not going to let you go anywhere unescorted," Jeff said.

Neyla took the paste ring and all of the tools, putting them in her bundle. Then she left the remains of Thomas's bundle. There was no way to hide the fact that he had broken into the cupboard.

But nothing was missing. So if the guard was smart, he could take credit for chasing the robber away.

Lots of ifs.

She took Thomas's other arm. Then she and Jeff dragged him out of the cupboard room, and back to the stairs.

Thomas thought of fighting, but he was outnumbered, and she had hurt him.

He wasn't sure he blamed her. He had destroyed her life's work.

Damn. He should have escaped. If she had only taken a few minutes longer to reach the cupboard, he probably would have escaped.

If she had been a different kind of woman, he would have asked her to join him. Who could tell if the Confessor's ring was different? He would have wagered no one had tested that sapphire in hundreds of years. Besides, modern paste sapphires weren't made of plastic. They were crystals too, just not quite as valuable as the real thing.

But he knew better than to argue. Besides, what could they do to him? When they got back to the twenty-first century, it would be their word against his. And even if they convinced the folks at Portals that he had tried to steal the Jewels, it didn't matter. The crime had occurred hundreds of years in the past.

No one could prosecute him.

No one would dare.

Or so he told himself as he let them drag him up the stairs, back to the door, and—he hoped—the future.

Neyla's heart was pounding. Adrenaline still poured through her system. She wanted to move fast, but didn't dare.

The others were waiting at the top of the staircase. Benedict looked terrified. Dan just seemed nervous. He kept turning his head, as if expecting someone to attack them at any moment.

But if no one had come when the guard was attacked, then no one was going to come at all. One thing about thick stone walls. They were mostly soundproof.

Dan took Thomas from her. Neither he nor Benedict seemed surprised that they had captured Thomas, or that he looked a little roughed up.

They led him through the corridor as if this had been the plan all along. The guard was still prone. But he had raised one hand to his head and he was moaning. They had to hurry.

Neyla pushed open the doors. The air outside was cooler but smellier. It was still dark. Somehow she had expected the sun to be coming up. It seemed like she had been in Martin Tower for hours, but it had probably been less than thirty minutes.

She made Jeff extinguish his candle, then the five of them hurried across the grounds. She kept an eye out for the guard who had made his rounds earlier, but she didn't see him.

When she reached the spot where the team had arrived, she almost told them to get their remotes.

Then she realized that they were feet lower than they had been. They might materialize inside the ground. For a moment, she felt at a complete loss. The plan had been to find a safe place, figure out the guard schedule, and get out at the right time. She didn't have time. She had no idea what the right place was now. The others stared at her. Then she realized what she had to do.

She opened the bundle and pulled out the skeleton key she had taken from Thomas. "We're going inside," she said.

They didn't disagree. They knew they had no choice.

It only took a few minutes to find a door and get them inside. She was heading to the one place she knew hadn't changed in all the centuries of the White Tower's existence: the Chapel of St. John.

It was up several floors, but she had no trouble getting there. The team ran into no guards, no locked doors. The White Tower's interior looked pretty much the same now as it would centuries in the future.

The others followed her without question, dragging Thomas with them. For once, he had nothing to say. No quips, no barbs, no suggestions. He just let them take him back to the future.

She wasn't sure she liked this subdued Thomas any more than she liked the arrogant man she had first met. But she wasn't going to worry about him at the moment.

She led the group up stairs and through dingy corridors to the Chapel of St. John. Under the impressive Norman arches, candles burned on the altar. Votive candles, in memory of someone. The Church of England had picked up a lot of habits from the Catholic Church and continued to practice them, for which she was very grateful.

Because the altar itself looked unchanged to her.

She looked at her group. They were filthy from running through dirty corridors. Thomas's jaw had marks from her fingertips. Jeff actually had some blood on his face, but whether that was from her or from Thomas, she didn't know.

"Ready to go home?" she asked.

They nodded.

She would have to untie Thomas so that he could use his remote.

She leaned toward him. "Try anything, and one of us will take that remote and leave you here."

He looked up at her. "Have a little compassion," he said. "You're in a church."

She grabbed his remote. "I mean it," she said.

He sighed. "I'll be a good boy."

She nodded, then untied his hands.

They all grabbed their remotes. As she nodded, they pressed the activation switches, and everything went dark.

The wind came up, but it didn't blow hot and cold this time. It blew softly, marking her movement. The smell barely changed either, but maybe she couldn't smell anything after having been in that stinky place.

Then she stopped moving and stumbled against the altar. Jeff stumbled against her. Dan staggered forward, and Benedict fell onto a chair.

Thomas landed in a heap on the floor beside her. His face had turned white. He really was in terrible shape.

No candles burned. Pews extended in front of her, and beyond them one of the Yeoman Warders peered inside.

Her heart jumped.

Had they been caught? Were they going to be arrested?

Then she realized it didn't matter.

The worst thing they had done would be to have stayed past closing time. If the remotes had worked properly, they would have arrived here only a second or two later than they left.

In an entirely different part of the Tower.

"We're closing up," the Yeoman Warder said in very understandable modern British English. "That includes the gift shop. If you want to buy something for home, I'd suggest leaving now. You've got a bit of a walk ahead of you."

"Thank you," Neyla said. Her voice sounded wheezy. She was still lightheaded.

The Warder went back into the corridor, his message delivered.

Jeff grabbed Thomas's arms. Neyla retied his wrists, then leaned against him. "Try anything, and I'll have you arrested."

"For what?" he asked.

"Whatever I can think of," she said, not conceding that he had a good point. What could they do to him? His crime was in the past. Unless he had completed a major identity theft.

Thomas Ayliffe couldn't be his real name.

They secured Thomas, then grouped around him—Jeff and Benedict on each side, Dan behind, using his body to hide Thomas's tied hands. Neyla stayed a few yards ahead, just in case something came at them.

They didn't say anything as they trooped down the aisle, out of the chapel, and into the Inner Ward, heading back to the gate. Heading home.

He had a concussion, a bruised tailbone, and cracked ribs. Thomas lay on cool hospital sheets where he was being kept for observation. He had a private room, courtesy of Portals, and a security guard, also courtesy of Portals.

He wasn't to talk to anyone outside of the company. He wasn't sure if that was forever or just for the duration.

All he did know was that the hospital wanted him here for observation since, they believed, he'd had quite a fall when he was urban free climbing with Dan. As if Thomas would ever do anything that stupid.

He wasn't supposed to close his eyes, but he was tired. Tired and disappointed. So close. He'd actually held the Jewels in his hand. How many modern thieves could say that they had touched the Crown Jewels?

Although touching wasn't nearly enough. And he wasn't going to be able to go back to his sponsor and make another attempt. He had failed. His first big failure.

And he doubted Portals would ever let anyone get that close again.

At least he wasn't going to jail. Wycroft had told him that much during his short visit here. Thomas wasn't going to jail because they couldn't prove identity theft and everything else would be "too incredible for any local magistrate to adjudicate."

Thank heavens.

So Thomas, once he healed, would be escorted out of the hospital, out of London, and away from any Portals site forever.

Although he had seen enough of their systems to know that forever might not be that long. Since his sponsor still had people inside, and Thomas did know the system.

He wouldn't get near the Crown Jewels again. At least, not in 1674. And he wasn't going near Neyla.

But if he remembered right, Henry VIII had sold some of the Jewels to pay for his various wars. Maybe, if Thomas figured out the right way to approach things, he could try again.

Years from now.

If he wanted to put in the work.

Which he wasn't sure he did.

Neyla stood in her window, looking down on the Tower Bridge, and the Tower itself.

She would be going back, after she had a ton of allergy shots, once she figured out when would be a good time. She couldn't go anywhere near the first of July, thanks to Thomas. That assault on the guard hadn't made it into the history books and, so far as she could tell, had no impact on history itself. But it would harm her little band if they returned at the wrong moment.

Now, at least, she could wait until Pete was well. She'd have her original team back. Thank heavens. She wouldn't have to worry about another Thomas Ayliffe.

She had tried to visit him in the hospital, but Wycroft had cordoned him off. Ayliffe was leaving London as soon as he was able, which angered her.

He would be a free man, because they couldn't prove identity theft. His identification was rock-solid, no matter how much she believed he had made up the name. They couldn't charge him with corporate espionage, not without divulging a few too many corporate secrets, and they couldn't charge him with any other crime.

In fact, Wycroft pointed out to Neyla, she was the one who faced legal charges. She had assaulted Ayliffe in front of a witness.

In 1674. Because he had made her completely and utterly furious.

She had expected to learn things while in the past. She just hadn't expected to learn she was capable of such violence.

It disturbed her less than it probably should have. She should have been appalled. But she had always known that humans had a base nature. She had figured people in the past were closer to it than people of her generation. But she had proven her own assumptions wrong.

Without that base nature, the Tower wouldn't exist. And she wouldn't have the bones of princes to investigate.

Maybe she should thank Ayliffe. He had taught her that the past could be dangerous and unexpected—and so could she. ○

Comics Old and New

Please allow me to indulge once again my fond mania for all things Jack Kirby. After reviewing Mark Evanier's biography *Kirby: King of Comics* a few columns ago, I would be positively negligent in my critic's duties if I did not point you toward *The Best of Simon and Kirby* (Titan Books, hardcover, \$39.95, 240 pages, ISBN 978-1845769314). This stunning, oversized compilation of complete stories by Kirby and his perpetual pal and collaborator Joe Simon samples their immense output from 1940 all the way up to 1960. It features an introduction by Simon himself (still, as I write, vibrantly with us at age ninety-six!), and sectional mini-essays by Evanier.

But the main attraction, of course, is found in the art and narrative. Simon's fertile—even febrile?—scripting brain is ably paralleled by Kirby's dynamic drawings. The first creator produces a concept such as “telekinetic energy flinger.” His partner then illustrates loose-limbed bodies flying wildly through the air under the impetus of the aforementioned flinger. To add that the villain of this piece is a two-headed midget and the hero a “newscaster” and his juvenile assistant (Fighting American and Speedboy) is merely to add surreal icing on the cosmic cake. (All this is on display in the story titled “Assignment: Find the King of the Crime Syndicate.”)

The more than two dozen stories here are arranged by genre, from superheroes to romance, westerns to humor, giving proof of Simon and Kirby's relentless broad professionalism and powers of invention. The remarkable compression of Simon's plotting—sometimes leading to loony leaps of illogic—is matched by Kirby's brawling, graceful carnality.

Which is not to say the lads could not be

ironically metatextual—as in their Boy Commandos story “Satan Wears a Swastika,” where the creators themselves appear as characters—or subliminally erotic, as in “The Savage in Me!” whose Sue Storm lookalike battles her own inner passions involving a roughneck adventurer.

Great as these Golden Age stories are, they are even more valuable as a proving ground for the exemplary work that Kirby would do during the Silver Age. You read them with nine-tenths of your mind on the story, and one-tenth looking for prototypes of more famous characters. Somehow that adds up to 110 percent pleasure.

Titan Books has lavished gorgeous design concepts and color reproduction fidelity on this package. What's even better is that at least six more volumes in this series are promised.

Although Victoria Francés's new book, *Arlene's Heart* (NBM, hardcover, \$24.95, 80 pages, ISBN 978-1-56163-552-8) is as hip and *au courant* as a song by the Dresden Dolls, whose wounded cabaret-goth sensibility it shares, this fantasy in text and pictures also reminds me, curiously, of George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871). That Francés manages to convey both postmodern urban anomie and pre-modern allegorical innocence is a major achievement.

We open with the parable of orphaned, New York City dollmaker Arlene, who succumbs to breast cancer and dies, even after having a mastectomy. She reawakens in some inexplicable afterlife, transformed into a chest-scarred doll. Feeling that her heart has been ripped from her, the puppet Arlene begins a bardo odyssey through labyrinths both dreamy and nightmarish, encountering creatures and beings who alternately want to aid or destroy her.

Spanish creator Francés exhibits a flair for both prose and visuals. The story itself, although it verges at points on heavy-handedness, ultimately redeems itself from any charges of preaching by its intensity and refusal to point accusatory fingers toward either saviors or villains. But it's Francés's artwork that will stun and capture the reader's sensibilities and, well, heart. With meticulous mimesis, Francés portrays the most surreal images whose cumulative effects might be likened to those produced by the films of one of her countrymen, Guillermo del Toro.

This is a journey through eerie lands both dark and beautiful.

Hairy Neolithic Male Seeks Modern Man for Sex and Reminiscences

The concept of a representative from humanity's prehistoric past surviving down to the present day is one of SF's "power chords," to use Rudy Rucker's designation for such seminal tropes. Usually the survivor is a Neanderthal, which adds spice and drama to the disjunction between modernity and antiquity. Everyone from L. Sprague de Camp to Philip José Farmer to Algis Budrys has employed this riff. It even became a cliché adopted by a recent series of insurance advertisements. So you might think that the motif has been plumbed beyond redemption.

Ah, but a true power chord is infinitely replenishable, given enough talent on the part of the author. And Rebecca Ore proves this to the max with her new "novel in stories," *Centuries Ago and Very Fast* (Aqueduct Press, trade paper, \$16.00, 160 pages, ISBN 978-1933500-25-6).

We are introduced in economical fashion to three main characters: Vel, a seemingly immortal man who was born in the Paleolithic, some fourteen thousand years ago. Not only has Vel survived to the present, thanks to remarkable regenerative abilities, he's also discovered how to time-jump, so that he can visit any point along his personal continuum. His unique history is known to one of his generations-separated descendants, a modern woman named Carolyn. And he's recently also

disburdened himself to a new lover named Thomas. For Vel, you see, is gay.

Now, at first this sounds like the setup to a bad joke or parody. But in the capable hands of Ore, it's anything but. This novel comes with an endorsement from Samuel Delany, and on sexual and gender issues it exhibits the same polished rawness and sophisticated yet wide-eyed wonderment that Delany's writing is famous for. Vel is utterly believable—and believably strange—as a fusion of pre-modern, post-modern, and timeless attitudes and habits. He narrates most of the book, with some chapters from Thomas's POV, and he comes across as the ultimate alien in our midst, rather in the manner of the hero of Carol Emshwiller's *The Secret City* (2007). A cousin to our species, yet not exactly in our direct lineage.

After revealing his true nature to Thomas, Vel takes up domestic life with his new partner, as he has done with countless mortals before. The bitter-sweet nature of this necessarily doomed relationship (doomed by Thomas's natural lifespan) infuses the book.

In the interstices of this contemporary frame-tale we get Vel's anecdotes, from being present at the Stonewall Riots to meeting a Roman conqueror. The depictions of Paleolithic life are weird and intuitively perfect, and the historical segments resonate just fine. And of course, as Ore explains in an afterword, she made sure to include plenty of hot sex.

In a way, Ore is following in the footsteps of Virginia Woolf as well: this is her caveman *Orlando* (1928).

Stark and the Sub Rosa

If you were an inventive and talented young novelist, and you decided to cross-breed James O'Barr's *The Crow*, Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*, Jack Vance's *Demon Princes*, and DC Comics's *Hellblazer*—why, even then it's unlikely that you, our hypothetical young hotshot, would be able to equal the glory that is *Sandman Slim* (Eos, hardcover, \$24.99, 384 pages, ISBN 978-0-06-171430-6), simply because neither you nor anyone else is playing the

game at the same high level as Richard Kadrey, veteran author of this afore-adumbrated hybrid occult fairytale.

Kadrey has fashioned a high-octane urban fantasy (in both the older and newer sense of that genre designation) that relentlessly takes the reader from one slambang setpiece to another, with relatively quiet interludes of no small meaningful meditateness on the issues of justice, revenge, love, and hate. He's crafted a novel that seems at first all surface thrills, but which, upon reflection, conceals portals to more majestic ethical and philosophical realms.

Just like the demonic key whose possession grants interdimensional access, and which is literally embedded in the protagonist's heart.

Say what?

Well, let's back up a moment.

Jimmy Stark was once a member of the Sub Rosa secret society, actual working magicians lurking amongst us mundanes. Talented and precocious, he was seen as a threat by a fellow named Mason. And so Mason sent Stark to Hell and killed his girlfriend, with the complicity of several other Sub Rosa members. Stark spent eleven years in the inferno, playing with demons, before escaping back to Earth. Now, fortified with all he's learned and become (don't forget that mystical key lodged in his circulatory organ), Stark is intent on revenge. He begins hunting down his tormentors, after hooking up with old pal Vidoq and acquiring a new chum in the form of a woman named Alegra. Through the more decadent precincts of Los Angeles they will track those malefactors who deserve to die, and dispense supernatural justice.

But not content with this simple yet potent scenario, Kadrey ups the ante considerably at the two-thirds mark by introducing new players and new motives, heretofore hidden, into the supernatural mix. That's when Stark becomes "Sandman Slim," Abomination and Monster Killer, and finds the fate of all creation resting on his punk shoulders.

Kadrey's language in this book is juicy,

slangy, and funny. (The engaging narrative voice is first-person POV from Stark.) L.A. is not just a seedy noir city, it's "what happens when a bunch of Lovecraftian elder gods and porn starlets spend a week-end locked up in the Chateau Marmont snorting lines of crank off Jim Morrison's bones." Numerous high-flying metaphors like this abound. The reader is carried along on a current of pure wise-ass disdain and recklessness. Moreover, Kadrey gives his magic a tactile heft and consequentiality that raises the action above any charge of whimsy or feyness.

This tale is eminently filmable, and we pray for the day Hollywood takes notice—so long as they don't cast Keanu Reeves as Stark!

Your Money and Your Life

Two distinct and superior germlines flow into Alex Irvine's newest novel, *Buyout* (Del Rey, trade paper, \$14.00, 319 pages, ISBN 978-0-345-49433-7), making it a potent mutant literary offspring that challenges more generic and staid SF for ecosystem dominance.

On the one hand, Irvine beautifully appropriates and comes wholeheartedly to earn as his own the hip, sardonic voice and attitude of mainstream authors of social commentary like Bruce Wagner, Kurt Andersen, and Tom Wolfe. On the other hand, he embraces and extends the comic-inferno SF of Pohl and Kornbluth, Kurt Vonnegut, and Robert Sheckley.

And then, adding a third parent to the genetic mix, Irvine introduces a healthy squirt of Philip K. Dick genes, in the form of little-guy protagonist trapped in surreal, entropic circumstances revolving around the nature and value of human life. It is no accident that our hero's surname "Kindred," alludes to the K in PKD.

And what is the conceptual Jell-O-mold that allows such seemingly disparate ingredients to coalesce into a tasty, well-formed treat? Exactly this scenario:

In the year 2040 (not "one hundred years from now," as the back-cover copy bafflingly contends), heartless fiscal entrepreneurs come up with a new notion for

leveraging money. Certain indisputably guilty and repugnant criminals facing life in prison without parole will be able to arrange a "buyout." In return for voluntarily submitting to otherwise-precluded executions, the prisoners will get a huge sum of money (still only a small portion of what they would have cost the state in the long run) that can be assigned to their heirs. Everybody wins. Until the real costs of this scheme become apparent.

Our protagonist is one Martin Kindred, insurance expert, assigned to be the public face of the buyout plan. As with many PKD types, he faces marital turmoil, professional hurdles, and annoyingly dissenting inner voices. (A glitch in his car's software falls just short of a typical phildickian hectoring AI.) He starts out as a complacent cog in the system, concerned with money and misguided principles, until events jolt him fully "awake."

As counterbalance to Martin we get his roguish pal, Charlie Rhodes, private investigator who vets every potential buyout to make sure that no embarrassing details lurk in the victim's background that the hyper-vigilant media could use to bring down the buyout program. Charlie's streetwise savvy is the perfect foil to Martin's high-mindedness, and Irvine even frequently switches to Charlie's POV, much as Dick would wander in and out of the multiple consciousnesses of his characters. Only when Irvine does this, you know it's deliberate!

In the end, Martin's problem is encapsulated in some dialogue he has with a taxi driver.

"I knew it," the cabbie said. "You're not perfect, but you try to do the right thing for the right reason"

"Yeah, I do," Martin said.

"Well that," the cabbie said, "is the road to madness. But you should still try to do it."

Jester Gigolo

For an author who's previously ridden roughshod in humorous fashion over the life of Christ, in *Lamb: The Gospel Ac-*

cording to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal (2002), the radical vivisection and Frankenstein reassemblage of the corpse of Shakespeare should be a cakewalk—if that's not mixing up my metaphors too much. And so we do indeed discern, in Christopher Moore's newest, *Fool* (William Morrow, hardcover, \$26.99, 311 pages, ISBN 978-0-06-059031-4). This novel, from one of fantastika's finest humorists, comes off as more easygoing than acidic, formulaic rather than visionary. It's off-the-cuff Mel Brooks or Monty Python-style humor. And while the laughs are copious, the whole affair has a certain over-familiarity to it. Easy targets glibly jabbed.

One could never say this of Moore's best work, such as my favorite of his, *Fluke, or, I Know Why the Winged Whale Sings* (2003). In the majority of his books, all featuring contemporary settings, he plumbs the weirdness of the postmodern world via relatable albeit gonzo characters. Moreover, he's a distinctly American voice.

In his new book, a comical re-casting of *King Lear* (1606) from the Fool's POV, Moore, perforce, adopts the original cast of the play, employing a British accent. So he has to make use of pre-formed characters not necessarily perfectly tuned to his sensibilities and themes (although some new folks, such as the Fool's simple-minded assistant Drool, are introduced). And while his mastery of the language and cultural touchstones of those sceptered isles is capable and easy to accept, that distinct American voice is absent and missed. Although truthfully, I'm awfully glad for the invention of such British towns as Dog Snogging and Bonking Ewe.

Our narrator, Pocket (so called for his small size), is Lear's famous Fool. But this is not to say he's bound by his textual role. He's more concerned with every other possible non-canonical event than with Lear's tragic downfall. Self-preservation and self-aggrandizement are Pocket's main concerns, and we watch him scampering from one self-serving situation to another, usually involving women, food,

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drink, or some bawdy combination of the three. He's meant to be an utterly amoral fellow, doing good only by accident, and his ultimate ennoblement seems a bit forced and out of character.

But Moore works hard to ensure that events spin along so merrily and absurdly that any questions we have about the ultimate import of all these shenanigans is outweighed by the slapstick. He even allows us to interpret events, if we wish, as some kind of post-apocalyptic recycling of history, with references to the vanished empire of "Merica," producer of such literary masterpieces as "*Green Eggs and Hamlet*."

But in general, it's most fruitful to read this tale as pure parody on the order of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). As such, it lovingly takes the piss out of a venerable literary icon in a fashion guaranteed to entertain.

YA SF 4 U

Alerted by an appeal from their author, I am happy to recommend to you

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two novels of recent vintage: *The Prometheus Project: Trapped* (Nartea Publishing, trade paper, \$9.95, 139 pages, ISBN 0-9748765-4-2) and *The Prometheus Project: Captured* (Nartea Publishing, trade paper, \$7.95, 139 pages, ISBN 1-933255-33-1). As their author, Douglas E. Richards, mentions, while fantasy YA is plentiful, genuine YA SF is more rare and to be cherished. These books, written in a spare yet cinematic style, follow the exploits of brother and sister Ryan and Regan Resnick as they seek to unriddle an alien installation discovered beneath Earth's surface. Readers will surely be reminded of Eleanor Cameron's *Mushroom Planet* series, as well as Heinlein's *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* (1958), and even Clarke's *2001* (1968). A scientist and journalist by trade, Richards is rigorous about his science, yet still vividly speculative, able to capture the imagination of any teen, I think. My only complaint: aren't those two terminal adjectives in the titles nearly identical? ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

It'll be at Boskone on the Presidents Day weekend; but CapriCon, ConDFW and GeneriCon are also recommended. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2010

29-31—**Creation**. For info, write: 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91202. Or phone: (818) 409-0960 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) creationent.com. (E-mail) creatitickets@creationent.com. Con will be held in: Nashville TN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Gaylord Opryland Resort. Guests will include: media personalities. Commercial media event.

29-31—**ConJour**. conjour.net. U. of Houston Clear Lake, Houston TX. Gene Welch, Susan & Linda Nightingale. SF/fantasy.

29-31—**VeriCon**. vericon.org. Harvard University, Cambridge MA. General SF and fantasy, comics and gaming.

29-31—**OhayoCon**. ohayocon.org. godai@centaurstage.com. Hyatt Regency Hotel, Columbus OH. Anime.

FEBRUARY 2010

5-7—**AggieCon**. (979) 268-3068. aggiecon.tamu.edu. College Station TX. S. Gould, E. Datlow, T. McCaffrey, Perry, Rhodes.

5-7—**SuperCon**. supercon.info. Brentwood Courtyard Suites, Rochester MN. Low-key relaxacon on Super Bowl weekend.

5-7—**What the Hell? Con**. Guilford College, Greensboro NC. "Celebrating all things geek."

5-7—**Creation**. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com. LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. Commercial media-oriented event.

6-7—**EvilleCon**. evillecon.com. Downtown Executive Inn, Evansville IN (near Louisville KY). Anime.

6-7—**G-Anime**. ganime.ca. Palais des Congrès, Gatineau QC. Reding, Bonneau, Kyowa Quebec, La Brigade SNWI. Anime.

11-14—**CapriCon**, 126 E. Wing #244, Arlington Hts. IL 60004. capricon.org. Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. Fred Pohl.

12-14—**Boskone**, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 623-2311. boskone.org. Boston MA. A. Reynolds, John Picacio.

12-14—**ConDFW**, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. www.condfw.org. Crowne Plaza, 1635/75, Dallas TX. McDewitt, Moon.

12-14—**GeneriCon**, RSFA, Union Admin. Office, #3702, 1110 8th, Troy NY 12180. genericon.org. RPI, Troy NY.

12-14—**FarPoint**, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. (410) 579-1257. farpoint.com. Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Media SF.

12-14—**KatsuCon**, Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. katsucon.org. Gaylord Nat'l. Resort, Nat'l. Harbor MD (near DC). Anime.

19-21—**ConNooga**, 5251-C Hwy. 153, #280, Hixson TN 37343. connooga.com. Chattanooga TN. "Multi-fandom."

19-21—**Gallifrey**, Box 8022, Los Angeles CA 91406. gallifreyone.com. LAX Marriott. Peter Davison. Dr. Who.

19-21—**OwlCon**. owlcon.com. Rice University, Houston TX. Gaming, SF, Fantasy, film, anime.

19-21—**Furry Fiesta**. furryfiesta.org. Addison (Dallas area) TX. Anthropomorphics/furries.

19-21—**Naka-Kon**, Box 442640, Lawrence KS 66044. naka-kon.com. Hyatt, Kansas City MO. A. Belcher, C. Patton. Anime.

26-28—**SheVaCon**, Box 7622, Roanoke VA 24019. shevacon.org. Holiday Inn Tanglewood. S. Hickman, Spatl, P. Mayhew.

26-28—**ConCave**, 124 Fairlawn Ave., Lexington KY 40505. concaveky.com. Hampton Inn, Horse Cave KY. Relaxacon.

27—**Queen City Kamikaze**. queencitykamikaze.com. Manchester Memorial, Manchester NH. Anime.

MARCH 2010

12-14—**All-Con**, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. (817) 472-6368. all-con.org. Dallas TX area. Media/costuming.

12-14—**MegaCon**, Box 1097, Safety Harbor FL 34695. megaconvention.com. Convention Center, Orlando FL. Comics/media.

12-15—**RevelCon**, c/o Box 130602, Houston TX 77219. severalunlimited.com. Houston TX. Adult media fanzines.

AUGUST 2010

5-8—**ReConStruction**, Box 31706, Raleigh NC 27612. reconstructionsf.org. The North American SF Convention. \$95.

SEPTEMBER 2010

2-6—**Aussiecon 4**, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. aussiecon4.org.au. World SF Convention. US\$225.

AUGUST 2011

17-21—**RenoVation**, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. rcfi.org. Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers, Vallejo. WorldCon. \$140.

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